

DAN SIMMONS



HYPERION  
TALES

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## **INTRODUCTION TO “ORPHANS OF THE HELIX”**

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This story started—as all stories do—as a vague rumination, quickened into focus during a Star Trek: Voyager telephone pitch, was midwifed into existence by Robert Silverberg, and finally resulted in me missing the Ninth Annual Lincoln Street Water Fight. It is, I think, a decent story, but it wasn’t worth missing the water fight.

Some readers may know that I’ve written four novels set in the “Hyperion Universe”—Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion, Endymion, and The Rise of Endymion. A perceptive subset of those readers—perhaps the majority—know that this so-called epic actually consists of two long and mutually dependent tales, the two Hyperion stories combined and the two Endymion novels combined, broken into four books because of the realities of publishing. An even smaller subset of readers might know that I’ve vowed not to write any more novels set in this Hyperion universe for a variety of reasons, chief among them being that I don’t want to dilute any existing vitality of the epic in a series of profitable but diminishing-returns-for-the-reader sequels.

Still, I never promised not to return to my Hyperion universe via the occasional short story or even novella-length tale. Readers enjoy such universes and miss them when they’re gone (or when the writer who created them is gone forever) and this nostalgia for old reading pleasures is precisely what gives rise to the kind of posthumous franchising—the sharecropping-for-profit of a writer’s original vision—that I hate so much in today’s publishing. But the occasional short work in an otherwise “completed” universe is my attempt at a compromise between retilling tired fields and completely abandoning the landscape.

Or something like that.

At any rate, this idea for a future Hyperion story had not yet become that supersaturated solution necessary before writing can commence, when a Star Trek producer contacted me about suggesting and writing an episode for their Voyager series. I had been contacted by the Star Trek people before and had had to beg off from even discussing such

*involvement, because of imminent novel deadlines or a film script I was working on or whatever.*

*Now, I've been known to say unkind things in public places about the Star Trek universe—calling Star Trek: The Next Generation the “Neutered Generation” in one guest of honor speech, for instance, or admitting in an interview that I saw Gene Roddenberry's much-loved vision of the future as essentially fascist. Perhaps the producers had forgiven me for those comments. Or much more likely, probably no one involved in the Star Trek business had ever come across them. In any event, they invited me to come to L.A. to “do a pitch” (a phrase I adore for its appropriate inanity) for their program Star Trek: Voyager and, when I said that I didn't have time for such a trip, allowed me to do one over the telephone.*

*In the meantime, they sent me about ten volumes of Star Trek background material—the “Bible” for the show, tech manuals, character outlines, synopses of previous and future episodes, diagrams and floorplans of Voyager—the whole nine yards. I admit that I enjoyed skimming through all this stuff, especially the “scientific explanation” of such fantasy gimmicks as the transporter and warp drive and so forth. It's part of the appeal of Star Trek—all the Star Treks—that there seems to be a complex universe there with rules and limitations and textures only partially glimpsed by the viewer. That is, I think, what fuels so much of the fannish speculation—whether the homoerotic fanzine tales concerning the original crew's characters or the endless variations on gaming.*

*So, the producer called me at the appointed date, although I admit that I had all but forgotten about the impending pitch.*

*“Essentially,” I said, “I'd like to script an episode in which the Voyager crew doesn't get its umpteenth failed chance to get home, but gets an opportunity to get outside the stupid ship.”*

*“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” said the producer. “What do you mean?”*

*“I mean even though the sets are getting bigger and they have the holodeck and all, these characters are still Spam in a can,” I said. “These guys spend years—freaking years—in corridors and turbolifts and on that boring post-modernist bridge. Their private quarters look like rooms in a Holiday Express. What if they had the chance to leave the ship forever and get out into space?”*

*“Uh-huh, uh-huh, yeah,” said the producer. “Go on.”*

*“Okay,” I say, getting the pitch-virus now, warming to the wonderfulness of my own imagination, “say the Voyager has to drop out of warp drive and visit a planetary system to replenish its dilithium crystals or to clean the barnacles off its anti-matter nacelles or to get fresh water or whatever the hell reason you've always got them diverting into harm's way...”*

*“Uh-huh, uh-huh, go on.”*

*“But instead of just a Sol-type system, this is a binary system with a red giant and a G-type star and...” I went on to explain the brilliant idea of an orbital forest filled with space-dwelling indigenies adapted to hard vacuum, capable of extending magnetic butterfly wings hundreds of kilometers across, of capturing the solar wind and of braving the magnetosphere shockwaves of space like birds in a hurricane, of a giant, programmed eating machine that came once every so many years in a huge elliptical orbit, from the red giant to the G-star and back again, chewing away at the space-dwelling butterflies’ orbital forest. I explained how the “problem” of the story could be the butterfly creatures’ offer to the Voyager crew—in exchange for just blasting the eating machine with one of their photon torpedoes—of using their nano-machinery to adapt the crew members to deep space, to get them out of their spam-in-a-can existence and into the freedom of flying between the worlds like migrating doves. Some of the crew members would have to want that freedom and Captain Whatshername would draw an Alamo-ish line-in-the-sand to decide who would stay, who would fly...*

“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” interrupted the producer gently. “I have a question.”

“Sure,” I said.

“What exactly is a binary system?”

Well, shit.

*In the end, their rejection of my pitch centered not so much on astronomical details, but on their anxiety about the cgi budget of that episode. When I pointed out that the astral butterflies wouldn’t be that expensive—blobs against the usual planetary digital imagery, they reminded me that once these butterflies visited the ship, they’d have to be...well... alien. Star Trek’s view of aliens was human actors with big brows or wrinkly noses or big-corded necks or all of the above. I wanted these huge, insectoid things.*

We parted amicably.

*I admit that I was relieved. I had never seen this little seed particle of an idea as a Star Trek episode. Besides, if I’d been hired to write the damned thing, I would have tried to have the vast majority of the crew desert to become butterflies, with Captain Mrs. Columbo staying behind with her hands on her hips and a few of the top regulars trekking on alone in their Spam can, while the liberated crew flew barrel rolls around the tin-and-plastic-and-carpet spaceship on its way out of the binary system.*

*Cut to some months later when Robert Silverberg contacted me about writing a long piece for his proposed anthology. Far Horizons. Bob saw the new book as a follow-up to his bestselling anthology, Legends, in which fantasy authors returned to their favorite fantasy universes to give us original tales. He was inviting SF authors of forest-killing mega-epics*

*to reprise their settings and among the other writers contributing would be Ursula K. Le Guin returning to her Ekumen universe, Joe Haldeman dealing with his Forever War again, Scott Card unearthing Ender, David Brin doing his Wonderbra thing with his Uplift Universe, Fred Pohl heecheeing us again, and so forth. I don't have many rules governing my career choices, but not turning down opportunities to insert myself in a pantheon of gods is one of them. I said yes.*

*Actually, the hard part was summarizing the million or so words of the "Hyperion Cantos" in the "1,000 words or fewer" demanded of the synopsis before my story. The story, of course, was "Orphans of the Helix" and returned my space butterflies, my fallen angels of hard vacuum, to just where they had started—as the mutated human Ousters of the four Hyperion books.*

*And the story was accepted. And it was published. And it was good. (Except for the fact that they printed my name as "David Simmons" in the author profiles at the back of the paperback edition, despite my regular whines and whimpers and milquetoast protests to the publishers—who, it turns out, are my editors and publishers at HarperCollins. Perhaps they—and Bob—are trying to tell me something.)*

*So that's it. That's the story of...*

*No, wait. I forgot the most important part.*

*How "Orphans of the Helix" made me miss the Ninth Annual Lincoln Street Water Fight.*

*Well, sometime after Far Horizons came out, Charles Brown of Locus called to inform me that "Orphans" had won the annual Locus Readers Award for Best Novelette. I've won more than a few of these Readers Poll Awards and I admit that they're very important to me... I mean, with the award comes another year's free subscription to Locus and my goal has been to receive the magazine forever and never pay for it. (A goal I would have realized up to this date, I should point out, were it not for Locus's small-minded policy of granting only one year's free subscription even if the author wins Readers Poll Awards in more than one category that year.)*

*So Charles informs me that I'm a winner at about the same time that I'm invited to attend the convention in Hawaii—Westercon 53 in Honolulu, July 1–4, 2000—and I accepted the invitation (a rarity for me, I attend very few SF conventions for reasons of schedules and deadlines.)*

*"You what?" said my wife Karen. "You're going to be gone on the Fourth?"*

*My daughter Jane put it more succinctly—"Dad, have you lost your mind?"*

*You see, we live in a neat old neighborhood in a not-terribly-large town along the Front Range of Colorado, near Boulder, and some years*

*ago, in 1992, Jane and I had—on the spur of the moment—photocopied a cartoon invitation and invited everyone on our block of Lincoln Street to show up at high noon on Independence Day, in the middle of the street, with water balloons or squirt guns or hoses or buckets or whatever, to participate in the Lincoln Street Water Fight. “Be there or be dry!” read our invitation. About twenty-five people showed up that first year and we had a ball—throwing water balloons and dousing our friends and neighbors for at least an hour before collapsing from exhaustion.*

*By 2000, the Lincoln Street Water Fight had grown to include about 75 people. Neighbors canceled travel plans so as not to miss THE WATER FIGHT. Both the east side of Lincoln and the (boo-hiss) west side brought in friends and relatives as ringers to improve their chances during THE WATER FIGHT. Participants included three-year-olds and eighty-three-year-olds. At the stroke of noon on the Fourth, several thousand water balloons (yes, we build and use catapults) are launched and untold gallons of water fill the air as we unleash high-pressure hoses and throw from buckets the size of gondolas. No one wants to miss THE WATER FIGHT.*

*And the local event has evolved further since 1992. After the water fight, everyone dries off and wanders down to the local school yard—Central School, where I taught sixth grade for eleven years—and we have a long, fun softball game in the playground, again toddlers to senior citizens participating, while a city band plays Sousa marches in Thompson Park across the street. Later in the afternoon, the neighbors and friends gather for a barbecue, rotating which backyard or front porch will host it. About nine P.M., people wander off—many of us to the nearby golf course—to watch the fireworks display in the fairgrounds just down the hill.*

*“You’re really going to miss the water fight?” asked Karen.*

*I’d promised to attend the convention. And attend I did. I enjoyed being in Hawaii. I enjoyed the panels and discussions with fans and fellow pros. I enjoyed the conversations with my editors and publisher at HarperCollins who were in attendance. (“The name’s Dan,” I said more than a few times, “not David . . .” To no avail.) I enjoyed hanging around with Charlie and the Locus people. I enjoyed receiving the award.*

*But I flew back to the mainland on the Fourth, catching only the hint of a few remaining fireworks just visible over the port wing late, while flying out of San Francisco, arriving at DIA around midnight and driving home in the dark, my mood as dark as the midnight, knowing what I would find when I woke up the next morning—waterlogged yards, buckets and squirt guns still on the front porch, swimsuits and T-shirts still drying on the shower rod, soggy sneakers on the side steps, a few tiny fragments of 10,000 burst water balloons in the grass where they had been missed*

*during the post-fight cleanup, and our Pembroke Welsh Corgi, Fergie, lying exhausted and water bloated (she tries to drink from every hose during the fight), that July Fifth grin of post-party satisfaction on her face.*

*I hope you like “Orphans of the Helix.” I enjoyed returning to the Hyperion universe to see what had happened to some of the distant Ousters and the Amoiete Spectrum Helix people. I hope you enjoy this post-Hyperion glimpse of them. I confess that I have some other Hyperion-universe short fiction in mind for the future. But on the off chance that any win any awards that would be handed out on the Fourth of July—well, include me out.*

*In the summer of 2001, not long before I wrote this introduction, we had the Tenth and Best Lincoln Street Water Fight ever. Everyone was there. No one was dry. Later that afternoon, we played softball for hours—no one kept track of the score—while the band played in the park. The barbecue was fun. The fireworks were the best ever.*

*You see, as one gets older, one has to decide on priorities. And I have. Literature and travel and fame and accolades are important, but not worth missing the Lincoln Street Water Fight.*

*Not by a long shot.*

## ORPHANS OF THE HELIX

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The great spinship translated down from Hawking space into the red and white double light of a close binary. While the 684,300 people of the Amoiete Spectrum Helix dreamed on in deep cryogenic sleep, the five AI's in charge of the ship conferred. They had encountered an unusual phenomenon and while four of the five had agreed it important enough to bring the huge spinship out of C-plus Hawking space, there was a lively debate—continuing for several microseconds—about what to do next.

The spinship itself looked beautiful in the distant light of the two stars, white and red light bathing its kilometer-long skin, the starlight flashing on the three thousand environmental deep-sleep pods, the groups of thirty pods on each of the one hundred spin hubs spinning past so quickly that the swing arms were like the blur of great, overlapping fan blades, while the three thousand pods themselves appeared to be a single, flashing gem blazing with red and white light. The Aeneans had adapted the ship so that the hubs of the spinwheels along the long, central shaft of the ship were slanted—the first thirty spin arms angled back, the second hub angling its longer thirty pod arms forward, so that the deep-sleep pods themselves passed between each other with only microseconds of separation, coalescing into a solid blur that made the ship under full spin resemble exactly what its name implied—*Helix*. An observer watching from some hundreds of kilometers away would see what looked to be a rotating human double DNA helix catching the light from the paired suns.

All five of the AI's decided that it would be best to call in the spin pods. First the great hubs changed their orientation until the gleaming helix became a series of three thousand slowing carbon-carbon spin arms, each with an ovoid pod visible at its tip through the slowing blur of speed. Then the pod arms stopped and retracted against the long ship, each deep-sleep pod fitting into a concave nesting cusp in the hull like an egg being set carefully into a container.

The *Helix*, no longer resembling its name so much now so as a long, slender arrow with command centers at the bulbous, triangular head, and

the Hawking drive and larger fusion engines bulking at the stern, morphed eight layers of covering over the nested spin arms and pods. All of the AI's voted to decelerate toward the G8 white star under a conservative four hundred gravities and to extend the containment field to Class 20. There was no visible threat in either system of the binary, but the red giant in the more distant system was—as it should be—expelling vast amounts of dust and stellar debris. The AI who took the greatest pride in its navigational skills and caution warned that the entry trajectory toward the G8 star should steer very clear of the L<sub>1</sub> Roche lobe point because of the massive heliosphere shock waves there, and all five AI's began charting a deceleration course into the G8 system that would avoid the worst of the heliosphere turmoil. The radiation shock waves there could be dealt with easily using even a Class 3 containment field, but with 684,300 human souls aboard and under their care, none of the AI's would take the slightest chance.

Their next decision was unanimous and inevitable. Given the reason for the deviation and deceleration into the G8 system, they would have to awaken humans. Saigyō, AI in charge of personnel lists, duty rosters, psychology profiles, and who had made it its business to meet and know each of the 684,300 men, women, and children, took several seconds to review the list before deciding on the nine people to awaken.

Dem Lia awoke with none of the dull hangover feel of the old-fashioned cryogenic fugue units. She felt rested and fit as she sat up in her deep-sleep crèche, the unit arm offering her the traditional glass of orange juice.

“Emergency?” she said, her voice no more thick or dull than it would have been after a good night’s sleep.

“Nothing threatening the ship or the mission,” said Saigyō, the AI. “An anomaly of interest. An old radio transmission from a system which may be a possible source of resupply. There are no problems whatsoever with ship function or life support. Everyone is well. The ship is no danger.”

“How far are we from the last system we checked?” said Dem Lia, finishing her orange juice and donning her shipsuit with its emerald green stripe on the left arm and turban. Her people had traditionally worn desert robes, each robe the color of the Amoiete Spectrum that the different families had chosen to honor, but robes were impractical for spinship travel where zero-g was a frequent environment.

“Six thousand three hundred light-years,” said Saigyō.

Dem Lia stopped herself from blinking. “How many years since last awakening?” she said softly. “How many years total voyage ship time? How many years total voyage time debt?”

“Nine ship years and one hundred two time debt years since last

awakening,” said Saigyō. “Total voyage ship time, thirty-six years. Total voyage time debt relative to human space, four hundred and one years, three months, one week, five days.”

Dem Lia rubbed her cheek. “How many of us are you awakening?”

“Nine”

Dem Lia nodded, quit wasting time chatting with the AI, glanced around only once at the two-hundred-some sealed sarcophagi where her family and friends continued sleeping, and took the main shipline people mover to the command deck where the other eight would be gathering.

The Aeneans had followed the Amoiete Spectrum Helix people’s request to construct the command deck like the bridge of an ancient torchship or some Old Earth, pre-Hegira seagoing vessel. The deck was oriented one direction to down and Dem Lia was pleased to notice on the ride to the command deck that the ship’s containment field held at a steady one-g. The bridge itself was about twenty-five meters across and held command-nexus stations for the various specialists, as well as a central table—round, of course—where the awakened were gathering, sipping coffee and making the usual soft jokes about cryogenic deep-sleep dreams. All around the great hemisphere of the command deck, broad windows opened onto space: Dem Lia stood a minute looking at the strange arrangement of the stars, the view back along the seemingly infinite length of the *Helix* itself where heavy filters dimmed the brilliance of the fusion flame tail that now reached back eight kilometers toward their destination—and the binary system itself, one small white star and one red giant, both clearly visible. The windows were not actual windows, of course; their holo pickups could be changed and zoomed or opaqued in an instant, but for now the illusion was perfect.

Dem Lia turned her attention to the eight people at the table. She had met all of them during the two years of ship training with the Aeneans, but knew none of these individuals well. All had been in the select group of fewer than a thousand chosen for possible awakening during transit. She checked their color-band stripes as they made introductions over coffee.

Four men, five women. One of the other women was also an emerald green, which meant that Dem Lia did not know if command would fall to her or the younger woman. Of course, consensus would determine that at any rate, but since the emerald green band of the Amoiete Spectrum Helix poem and society stood for resonance with nature, ability to command, comfort with technology, and the preservation of endangered life-forms—and all 684,300 of the Amoiete refugees could be considered endangered life-forms this far from human space—it was assumed that in unusual awakenings the greens would be voted into overall command.

In addition to the other green, a young, redhead woman named Res

Sandre, there was a red-band male, Patek Georg Dem Mio, a young, white-band female named Den Soa whom Dem Lia knew from the diplomacy simulations, an ebony-band male named Jon Mikail Dem Alem, an older yellow-band woman named Oam Rai whom Dem Lia remembered as having excelled at ship system's operations, a white-haired blue-band male named Peter Delen Dem Tae whose primary training would be in psychology, an attractive female violet-band—almost surely chosen for astronomy—named Kem Loi, and an orange male—their medic whom Dem Lia had spoken to on several occasions—Samel Ria Kem Ali, known to everyone as Dr. Sam.

After introductions there was a silence. The group looked out the windows at the binary system, the G8 white star almost lost in the glare of the *Helix*'s formidable fusion tail.

Finally the red, Patek Georg, said, "All right, ship. Explain."

Saigyō's calm voice came over the omnipresent speakers. "We were nearing time to begin a search for Earthlike worlds when sensors and astronomy became interested in this system."

"A *binary* system?" said Kem Loi, the violet. "Certainly not in the red giant system?" The Amoiete Spectrum *Helix* people had been very specific about the world they wanted their ship to find for them—G2 sun, Earthlike world at least a 9 on the old Solmev Scale, blue oceans, pleasant temperatures—paradise in other words. They had tens of thousands of light-years and thousands of years to hunt. They fully expected to find it.

"There are no worlds left in the red giant system," agreed Saigyō the AI affably enough. "We estimate that the system was a G2 yellow-white dwarf star..."

"Sol," muttered Peter Delen, the blue, sitting at Dem Lia's right.

"Yes," said Saigyō. "Much like Old Earth's sun. We estimate that it became unstable on the main sequence hydrogen burning stage about three and one half standard million years ago and then expanded to its red giant phase and swallowed any planets that had been in system."

"How many AU's out does the giant extend?" asked Res Sandre, the other green.

"Approximately one point-three," said the AI.

"And no outer planets?" asked Kem Loi. Violets in the *Helix* were dedicated to complex structures, chess, the love of the more complex aspects of human relationships, and astronomy. "It would seem that there would be some gas giants or rocky worlds left if it only expanded a bit beyond what would have been Old Earth's or Hyperion's orbit."

"Maybe the outer worlds were very small planetoids driven away by the constant outgassing of heavy particles," said Patek Georg, the red-band pragmatist.

"Perhaps no worlds formed here," said Den Soa, the white-band

diplomat. Her voice was sad. “At least in that case no life was destroyed when the sun went red giant.”

“Saigyō,” said Dem Lia, “why are we decelerating in toward this white star? May we see the specs on it, please?”

Images, trajectories, and data columns appeared over the table.

“What is that?” said the older yellow-band woman named Oam Rai.

“An Ouster forest ring,” said Jon Mikail Dem Alem. “All this way. All these years. And some ancient Ouster Hegira seedship beat us to it.”

“Beat us to what?” asked Res Sandre, the other green. “There are no planets in this system are there, Saigyō?”

“No, ma’am,” said the AI.

“Were you thinking of restocking on their forest ring?” said Dem Lia. The plan had been to avoid any Aenean, Pax, or Ouster worlds or strongholds found along their long voyage away from human space.

“This orbital forest ring is exceptionally bountiful,” said Saigyō the AI, “but our real reason for awakening you and beginning the in-system deceleration is that someone living on or near the ring is transmitting a distress signal on an early Hegemony code band. It is very weak, but we have been picking it up for two hundred and twenty-eight light-years.”

This gave them all pause. The *Helix* had been launched some eighty years after the Aenean Shared Moment, that pivotal event in human history which had marked the beginning of a new era for most of the human race. Previous to the Shared Moment, the Church-manipulated Pax society had ruled human space for the past three hundred years. These Ousters would have missed all of Pax history and probably most of the thousand years of Hegemony history that preceded the Pax. Added to that, the *Helix*’s time-debt added more than four hundred years of travel. If these Ousters had been part of the original Hegira from Old Earth or from the Old Neighborhood Systems in the earliest days of the Hegemony, they may well have been out of touch with the rest of the human race for fifteen hundred standard years or more.

“Interesting,” said Peter Delen Dem Tae, whose blue-band training included profound immersion in psychology and anthropology.

“Saigyō, play the distress signal, please,” said Dem Lia.

There came a series of static hisses, pops, and whistles with what might have been two words electronically filtered out. The accent was early Hegemony Web English.

“What does it say?” said Dem Lia. “I can’t quite make it out.”

“Help us,” said Saigyō. The AI’s voice was tinted with an Asian accent and usually sounded slightly amused, but his tone was flat and serious now.

The nine around the table looked at one another again in silence. Their goal had been to leave human and posthuman Aenean space far behind

them, allowing their people, the Amoiete Spectrum Helix culture, to pursue their own goals, to find their own destiny free of Aenean intervention. But Ousters were just another branch of human stock, attempting to determine their own evolutionary path by adapting to space, their Templar allies traveling with them, using their genetic secrets to grow orbital forest rings and even spherical startrees completely surrounding their suns.

“How many Ousters do you estimate live on the orbital forest ring?” asked Den Soa, who with her white training would probably be their diplomat if and when they made contact.

“Seven hundred million on the thirty-degree arc we can resolve on this side of the sun,” said the AI. “If they have migrated to all or most of the ring, obviously we can estimate a population of several billion.”

“Any sign of Akerataeli or the zeplins?” asked Patek Georg. All of the great forest rings and startreespheres had been collaborative efforts with these two alien races which had joined forces with the Ousters and Templars during the Fall of the Hegemony.

“None,” said Saigyō. “But you might notice this remote view of the ring itself in the center window. We are still sixty-three AU out from the ring...this is amplified ten thousand times.”

They all turned to look at the front window where the forest ring seemed only thousands of kilometers away, its green leaves and yellow and brown branches and braided main trunk curving away out of sight, the G8 star blazing beyond.

“It looks wrong” said Dem Lia.

“This is the anomaly that added to the urgency of the distress signal and decided us to bring you out of deep sleep,” said Saigyō, his voice sounding slightly bemused again. “This orbital forest ring is not of Ouster or Templar bioconstruction.”

Doctor Samel Ria Kem Ali, whistled softly. “An alien-built forest ring. But with human-descended Ousters living on it.”

“And there is something else we have found since entering the system,” said Saigyō. Suddenly the left window was filled with a view of a machine—a spacecraft—so huge and ungainly that it almost defied description. An image of the *Helix* was superimposed at the bottom of the screen to give scale. The *Helix* was a kilometer long. The base of this other spacecraft was at least a thousand times as long. The monster was huge and broad, bulbous and ugly, carbon black and insectoidal, bearing the worst features of both organic evolution and industrial manufacture. Centered in the front of it was what appeared to be a steel-toothed maw, a rough opening lined with a seemingly endless series of mandibles and shredding blades and razor sharp rotors.

“It looks like God’s razor,” said Patek Georg Dem Mio, the cool irony

undercut slightly by a just-perceptible quaver in his voice.

“God’s razor my ass,” said Jon Mikail Dem Alem softly. As an ebony, life support was one of his specialties and he had grown up tending the huge farms on Vitus-Gray-Balianus B. “That’s a threshing machine from hell.”

“Where is it?” Dem Lia started to ask, but already Saigyō had thrown the plot on the holo showing their deceleration trajectory in toward the forest ring. The obscene machine-ship was coming in from above the ecliptic, was some twenty-eight AU ahead of them, was decelerating rapidly but not nearly as aggressively as the *Helix*, and was headed directly for the Ouster forest ring. The trajectory plot was clear—at its current rate of deceleration, the machine would directly intercept the ring in nine standard days.

“This may be the cause of their distress signal,” the other green, Res Sandre, said dryly.

“If it were coming at me or my world, I’d scream so loudly that you’d hear me two hundred and twenty-eight light-years away without a radio,” said the young white-band, Den Soa.

“If we started picking up this weak signal some two hundred twenty-eight light-years ago,” said Patek Georg. “It means that either that thing has been decelerating in-system very slowly, or...”

“It’s been here before,” said Dem Lia. She ordered the AI to opaque the windows and to dismiss itself from their company. “Shall we assign roles, duties, priorities, and make initial decisions?” she said softly.

The other eight around the table nodded soberly.

To a stranger, to someone outside the Spectrum Helix culture, the next five minutes would have been very hard to follow. Total consensus was reached within the first two minutes, but only a small part of the discussion was through talk. The combination of hand gestures, body language, shorthand phrases, and silent nods that had evolved through four centuries of a culture determined to make decisions through consensus worked well here. These people’s parents and grandparents knew the necessity of command structure and discipline—half a million of their people had died in the short but nasty war with the Pax remnant on Vitus-Gray-Balianus B, and then another hundred thousand when the fleeing Pax vandals came looting through their system some thirty years later. But they were determined to elect command through consensus and thereafter make as many decisions as possible through the same means.

In the first two minutes, assignments were settled and the subtleties around the duties dealt with.

Dem Lia was to be in command. Her single vote could override consensus when necessary. The other green, Res Sandre, preferred to

monitor propulsion and engineering, working with the reticent AI named Basho to use this time out of Hawking space to good advantage in taking stock.

The red-band male, Patek Georg, to no one's surprise accepted the position of chief security officer—both for the ship's formidable defenses and during any contact with the Ousters. Only Dem Lia could override his decisions on use of ship weaponry.

The young white-band woman, Den Soa, was to be in charge of communications and diplomacy, but she requested Peter Delen Dem Tae and he agreed to share the responsibility with her. Peter's training in psychology had included theoretical exobiopsychology.

Dr. Sam would monitor the health of everyone aboard and study the evolutionary biology of the Ousters and Templars if it came to contact.

Their ebony-band male, Jon Mikail Dem Alem, assumed command of life support—both in reviewing and controlling systems in the *Helix* along with the appropriate AI, but also arranging for necessary environments if they met with the Ousters aboard ship.

Oam Rai, the oldest of the nine and the ship's chess master, agreed to coordinate general ship systems and to be Dem Lia's principal advisor as events unfolded.

Kem Loi, the astronomer, accepted responsibility for all long-range sensing, but was obviously eager to use her spare time to study the binary system. "Did anyone notice what old friend our white star ahead resembles?" she asked.

"Tau Ceti," said Res Sandre without hesitation.

Kem Loi nodded. "And we saw the anomaly in the placing of the forest ring."

Everyone had. The Ousters preferred G2-type stars where they could grow their orbital forests at about one AU from the sun. This ring circled its star at only 0.36AU.

"Almost the same distance as Tau Ceti Center from its sun," mused Patek Georg. TC<sup>2</sup>, as it had been known for more than a thousand years, had once been the central world and capital of the Hegemony. Then it had become a backwater world under the Pax until a Church cardinal on that world attempted a coup against the beleaguered pope during the final days of the Pax. Most of the rebuilt cities had been leveled then. When the *Helix* had left human space eighty years after that war, the Aeneans were repopulating and repopularizing the ancient capital, rebuilding beautiful, classical structures on broad estates and essentially turning the lance-lashed ruins into an Arcadia. For Aeneans.

Assignments given and accepted, the group discussed the option of awakening their immediate family members from cryogenic sleep. Since Spectrum Helix families consisted of triune marriages—either one male

and two females or vice versa—and since most had children aboard, this was a complicated subject. Jon Mikail discussed the life support considerations—which were minor—but everyone agreed that it would complicate decision making with family awake only as passengers. It was agreed to leave them in deep sleep, with the one exception of Den Soa's husband and wife. The young white-band diplomat admitted that she would feel insecure without her two loved ones with her, and the group allowed this exception to their decision with the gentle suggestion that the reawakened mates would stay off the command deck unless there was compelling reason for them to be there. Den Soa agreed at once. Saigyō was summoned and immediately began the awakening of Den Soa's bond pair. They had no children.

Then the most central issue was discussed.

"Are we actually going to decelerate to this ring and involve ourselves in these Ousters' problems?" asked Patek Georg. "Assuming that their distress signal is still relevant."

"They're still broadcasting on the old bandwidths," said Den Soa, who had jacksensed into the ship's communications systems. The young woman with blond hair looked at something in her virtual vision. "And that monster machine is still headed their way."

"But we have to remember," said the red-band male, "that our goal was to avoid contact with possibly troublesome human outposts on our way out of known space."

Res Sandre, the green now in charge of engineering, smiled. "I believe that we made that general plan about avoiding Pax or Ouster or Aenean elements without considering that we would meet up with humans—or former humans—some eight thousand light-years outside the known sphere of human space."

"It could still mean trouble for everyone," said Patek Georg.

They all understood the real meaning of the red-band security chief's statement. Reds in the Spectrum Helix devoted themselves to physical courage, political convictions, and passion for art, but they also were deeply trained in compassion for other living things. The other eight understood that when he said the contact might mean trouble for "everyone," he meant not only the 684,291 sleeping souls aboard the ship, but also the Ousters and Templars themselves. These orphans of Old Earth, this band of self-evolving human stock, had been beyond history and the human pall for at least a millennium perhaps much longer. Even the briefest contact could cause problems for the Ouster culture as well.

"We're going to go in and see if we can help...and replenish fresh provisions at the same time if that's possible," said Dem Lia, her tone friendly but final. "Saigyō, at our greatest deceleration figure consistent with not stressing the internal containment fields, how long will it take us

to a rendezvous point about five thousand klicks from the forest ring?"

"Thirty-seven hours," said the AI.

"Which gets us there seven days and a bit before that ugly machine," said Oam Rai.

"Hell," said Dr. Sam, "that machine could be something the Ousters built to ferry themselves through the heliosphere shock fields to the red giant system. A sort of ugly trolley."

"I don't think so," said young Den Soa, missing the older man's irony.

"Well, the Ousters have noticed us," said Patek Georg, who was jacksensed into his system's nexus. "Saigyō, bring up the windows again, please. Same magnification as before."

Suddenly the room was filled with starlight and sunlight and the reflected light from the braided orbital forest ring that looked like nothing so much as Jack and the Giant's beanstalk, curving out of sight around the bright white star. Only now something else had been added to the picture.

"This is real time?" whispered Dem Lia.

"Yes," said Saigyō. "The Ousters have obviously been watching our fusion tail as we've entered the system. Now they're coming out to greet us."

Thousands—tens of thousands—of fluttering bands of light had left the forest ring and were moving like brilliant fireflies or radiant gossamers away from the braid of huge leaves, bark, and atmosphere. The thousands of motes of light were headed out-system, toward the *Helix*.

"Could you please amplify that image a bit more?" said Dem Lia.

She had been speaking to Saigyō, but it was Kem Loi, who was already wired into the ship's optic net, who acted.

Butterflies of light. Wings a hundred, two hundred, five hundred kilometers across catching the solar wind and riding the magnetic-field lines pouring out of the small, bright star. But not just tens of thousands of winged angels or demons of light, hundreds of thousands. At the very minimum, hundreds of thousands.

"Let's hope they're friendly," said Patek Georg.

"Let's hope we can still communicate with them," whispered young Den Soa. "I mean...they could have forced their own evolution any direction in the last fifteen hundred years."

Dem Lia set her hand softly on the table, but hard enough to be heard. "I suggest that we quit speculating and hoping for the moment and get ready for this rendezvous in..." She paused.

"Twenty-seven hours eight minutes if the Ousters continue sailing out-system to meet us," said Saigyō on cue.

"Res Sandre," Dem Lia said softly, "why don't you and your propulsion AI begin work now on making sure that our last bit of deceleration is mild enough that it isn't go to fry a few tens of thousands

of these Ousters coming to greet us. That would be a bad overture to diplomatic contact.”

“If they *are* coming out with hostile intent,” said Patek Georg, “the fusion drive would be one of the most potent weapons against...”

Dem Lia interrupted. Her voice was soft but brooked no argument. “No discussion of war with this Ouster civilization until their motives become clear. Patek, you can review all ship defensive systems, but let us have no further group discussion of offensive action until you and I talk about it privately.”

Patek Georg bowed his head.

“Are there any other questions or comments?” asked Dem Lia. There were none.

The nine people rose from the table and went about their business.

A largely sleepless twenty-four-plus hours later, Dem Lia stood alone and god-sized in the white star’s system, the G8 blazing away only a few yards from her shoulder, the braided world tree so close that she could have reached out and touched it, wrapped her god-sized hand around it, while at the level of her chest the hundreds of thousands of shimmering wings of light converged on the *Helix*, whose deceleration fusion tail had dwindled to nothing. Dem Lia stood on nothing, her feet planted steadily on black space, the alien forest ring roughly at her beltline, the stars a huge sphere of constellations and foggy galactic scatterings far above, around, and beyond her.

Suddenly Saigyō joined her. The 10th Century monk assumed his usual virreal pose: cross-legged, floating easily just above the plane of the ecliptic a few respectful yards from Dem Lia. He was shirtless and barefoot, and his round belly added to the sense of good feeling that emanated from the round face, squinted eyes, and ruddy cheeks.

“The Ousters fly the solar winds so beautifully,” muttered Dem Lia.

Saigyō nodded. “You notice though that they’re really surfing the shock waves riding out along the magnetic-field lines. That gives them those astounding bursts of speed.”

“I’ve been told that, but not seen it,” said Dem Lia. “Could you...”

Instantly the solar system in which they stood became a maze of magnetic-field lines pouring from the G8 white star, curving at first and then becoming as straight and evenly spaced as a barrage of laser lances. The display showed this elaborate pattern of magnetic-field lines in red. Blue lines showed the uncountable paths of cosmic rays flowing into the system from all over the galaxy, aligning themselves with the magnetic-field lines and trying to corkscrew their way up the field lines like swirling salmon fighting their way upstream to spawn in the belly of the star. Dem Lia noticed that magnetic-field lines pouring from both the

north and south poles of the sun were kinked and folded around themselves, thus deflecting even more cosmic waves that should otherwise have had an easy trip up smooth polar field lines. Dem Lia changed metaphors, thinking of sperm fighting their way toward a blazing egg, and being cast aside by vicious solar winds and surges of magnetic waves, blasted away by shock waves that whipped out along the field lines as if someone had forcefully shaken a wire or snapped a bullwhip.

“It’s stormy,” said Dem Lia, seeing the flight path of so many of the Ousters now rolling and sliding and surging along these shock fronts of ions, magnetic fields, and cosmic rays, holding their positions with wings of glowing forcefield energy as the solar wind propagated first forward and then backward along the magnetic-field lines, and finally surfing the shock waves forward again as speedier bursts of solar winds crashed into more sluggish waves ahead of them, creating temporary tsunami that rolled out-system and then flowed backward like a heavy surf rolling back in toward the blazing beach of the G8 sun.

The Ousters handled this confusion of geometries, red lines of magnetic field lines, yellow lines of ions, blue lines of cosmic rays, and rolling spectra of crashing shock fronts with seeming ease. Dem Lia glanced once out to where the surging heliosphere of the red giant met the seething heliosphere of this bright G8 star and the storm of light and colors there reminded her of a multihued, phosphorescent ocean crashing against the cliffs of an equally colorful and powerful continent of broiling energy. A rough place.

“Let’s return to the regular display,” said Dem Lia and instantly the stars and forest ring and fluttering Ousters and slowing *Helix* were back—the last two items quite out of scale to show them clearly.

“Saigyo,” said Dem Lia, “please invite all of the other AI’s here now.”

The smiling monk raised thin eyebrows. “All of them here at once?”

“Yes.”

They appeared soon, but not instantly, one figure solidifying into virtual presence a second or two before the next.

First came Lady Murasaki, shorter even than the diminutive Dem Lia, the style of her three-thousand-year-old robe and kimono taking the acting commander’s breath away. *What beauty Old Earth had taken for granted*, thought Dem Lia. Lady Murasaki bowed politely and slid her small hands in the sleeves of her robe. Her face was painted almost white, her lips and eyes were heavily outlined, and her long black hair was done up so elaborately that Dem Lia—who had worn short hair most of her life—could not even imagine the work of pinning, clasping, combing, braiding, shaping, and washing such a mass of hair.

Ikkyu stepped confidently across the empty space on the other side of the virtual *Helix* a second later. This AI had chosen the older persona of

the long-dead Zen poet: Ikkyu looked to be about seventy, taller than most Japanese, quite bald, with wrinkles of concern on his forehead and lines of laughter around his bright eyes. Before the flight had begun, Dem Ria had used the ship's history banks to read about the 15th Century monk, poet, musician, and calligrapher: it seemed that when the historical, living Ikkyu had turned seventy, he had fallen in love with a blind singer just forty years his junior and scandalized the younger monks when he moved his love into the temple to live with him. Dem Lia liked Ikkyu.

Basho appeared next. The great *haiku* expert chose to appear as a gangly 17th Century Japanese farmer, wearing the coned hat and clog shoes of his profession. His fingernails always had some soil under them.

Ryokan stepped gracefully into the circle. He was wearing beautiful robes of an astounding blue with gold trim. His hair was long and tied in a queue.

"I've asked you all here at once because of the complicated nature of this rendezvous with the Ousters," Dem Lia said firmly. "I understand from the log that one of you was opposed to translating down from Hawking space to respond to this distress call."

"I was," said Basho, his speech in modern post-Pax English but his voice gravel-rough and as guttural as a Samurai's grunt.

"Why?" said Dem Lia.

Basho made a gesture with his gangly hand. "The programming priorities to which we agreed did not cover this specific event. I felt it offered too great a potential for danger and too little benefit in our true goal of finding a colony world."

Dem Lia gestured toward the swarms of Ousters closing on the ship. They were only a few thousand kilometers away now. They had been broadcasting their peaceful intentions across the old radio bandwidths for more than a standard day. "Do you still feel that it's too risky?" she asked the tall AI.

"Yes," said Basho.

Dem Lia nodded, frowning slightly. It was always disturbing when the AI's disagreed on an important issue, but that it is why the Aeneans had left them Autonomous after the breakup of the TechnoCore. And that is why there were five to vote.

"The rest of you obviously saw the risk as acceptable?"

Lady Murasaki answered in her low, demure voice, almost a whisper. "We saw it as an excellent possibility to restock new foodstuffs and water, while the cultural implications were more for you to ponder and act on than for us to decide. Of course, we had not detected the huge spacecraft in the system before we translated out of Hawking space. It might have affected our decision."

"This is a human-Ouster culture, almost certainly with a sizable

Templar population, that may not have had contact with the outside human universe since the earliest Hegemony days, if then,” said Ikkyu with great enthusiasm. “They may well be the farthest flung outpost of the ancient Hegira. Of all humankind. A wonderful learning opportunity.”

Dem Lia nodded impatiently. “We close to rendezvous within a few hours. You’ve heard their radio contact—they say they wish to greet us and talk and we’ve been polite in return. Our dialects are not so diverse that the translator beads can’t handle them in face-to-face conversations. But how can we know if they actually come in peace?”

Ryokan cleared his throat. “It should be remembered that for more than a thousand years, the so-called Wars with the Ousters were provoked—first by the Hegemony and then by the Pax. The original Ouster deep-space settlements were peaceful places and this most-distant colony would have experienced none of the conflict.”

Saigyō chuckled from his comfortable perch on nothing. “It should also be remembered that during the actual Pax wars with the Ousters, to defend themselves, these peaceful, space-adapted humans learned to build and use torchships, modified Hawking drive warships, plasma weapons, and even some captured Pax Gideon drive weapons.” He waved his bare arm. “We’ve scanned every one of these advancing Ousters, and none carry a weapon—not so much as a wooden spear.”

Dem Lia nodded. “Kem Loi has shown me astronomical evidence which suggests that their moored seedship was torn away from the ring at an early date—possibly only years or months after they arrived. This system is devoid of asteroids and the Oort cloud has been scattered far beyond their reach. It is conceivable that they have neither metal nor an industrial capacity.”

“Ma’am,” said Basho, his countenance concerned, “how can we know that? Ousters have modified their bodies sufficiently to generate forcefield wings that can extend for hundreds of kilometers. If they approach the ship closely enough, they could theoretically use the combined plasma effect of those wings to attempt to breach the containment fields and attack the ship.”

“Beaten to death by angels’ wings” Dem Lia mused softly. “An ironic way to die.”

The AI’s said nothing.

“Who is working most directly with Patek Georg Dem Mio on defense strategies?” Dem Lia asked into the silence.

“I am,” said Ryokan.

Dem Lia had known that, but she still thought, *Thank God it’s not Basho*. Patek Georg was paranoid enough for the AI-human interface team on this specialty.

“What are Patek’s recommendations going to be when we humans

meet in a few minutes?” Dem Lia bluntly demanded from Ryokan.

The AI hesitated only the slightest of perceptible instants. AI’s understood both discretion and loyalty to the human working with them in their specialty, but they also understood the imperatives of the elected commander’s role on the ship.

“Patek Georg is going to recommend a hundred kilometer extension of the Class Twenty external containment field,” said Ryokan softly. “With all energy weapons on standby and pretargeted on the three hundred nine thousand, two hundred and five approaching Ousters.”

Dem Lia’s eyebrows rose a trifle. “And how long would it take our systems to lance more than three hundred thousand such targets?” she asked softly.

“Two point-six seconds,” said Ryokan.

Dem Lia shook her head. “Ryokan, please tell Patek Georg that you and I have spoken and that I want the containment field not at a hundred klick distance, but maintained at a steady one kilometer from the ship. It may remain a Class Twenty field—the Ousters can actually see the strength of it, and that’s good. But the ship’s weapons’ systems will not target the Ousters at this time. Presumably, they can see our targeting scans as well. Ryokan, you and Patek Georg can run as many simulations of the combat encounter as you need to feel secure, but divert no power to the energy weapons and allow no targeting until I give the command.”

Ryokan bowed. Basho shuffled his virtual clogs but said nothing.

Lady Murasaki fluttered a fan half in front of her face. “You trust,” she said softly.

Dem Lia did not smile. “Not totally. Never totally. Ryokan, I want you and Patek Georg to work out the containment field system so that if even one Ouster attempts to breach the containment field with focused plasma from his or her solar wings, the containment field should go to Emergency Class Thirty-five and instantly expand to five hundred klicks.”

Ryokan nodded. Ikkyu smiled slightly and said, “That will be one very quick ride for a great mass of Ousters, ma’am. Their personal energy systems might not be up to containing their own life support under that much of a shock, and it’s certain that they wouldn’t decelerate for half an AU or more.”

Dem Lia nodded. “That’s their problem. I don’t think it will come to that. Thank you all for talking to me.”

All six human figures winked out of existence.

Rendezvous was peaceful and efficient.

The first question the Ousters had radioed the *Helix* twenty hours earlier was “Are you Pax?”

This had startled Dem Lia and the others at first. Their assumption

was that these people had been out of touch with human space since long before the rise of the Pax. Then the ebony, Jon Mikail Dem Alem, said, “The Shared Moment. It has to have been the Shared Moment.”

The nine looked at each other in silence at this. Everyone understood that Aenea’s “Shared Moment” during her torture and murder by the Pax and TechnoCore had been shared by every human being in human space —a gestalt resonance along the Void Which Binds that had transmitted the dying young woman’s thoughts and memories and knowledge along those threads in the quantum fabric of the universe which existed to resonate empathy, briefly uniting everyone originating from Old Earth human stock. But out here? So many thousands of light-years away?

Dem Lia suddenly realized how silly that thought was. Aenea’s Shared Moment of almost five centuries ago must have propagated everywhere in the universe along the quantum fabric of the Void Which Binds, touching alien races and cultures so distant as to be unreachable by any technology of human travel or communication while adding the first self-aware human voice to the empathic conversation that had been going on between sentient and sensitive species for almost twelve billion years. Most of those species had long since become extinct or evolved beyond their original form, the Aeneans had told Dem Lia, but their empathic memories still resonated in the Void Which Binds.

Of course the Ousters had experienced the Shared Moment five hundred years ago.

“No, we are not Pax,” the *Helix* had radioed back to the three hundred some thousand approaching Ousters. “The Pax was essentially destroyed four hundred standard years ago.”

“Do you have followers of Aenea aboard?” came the next Ouster message.

Dem Lia and the others had sighed. Perhaps these Ousters had been desperately waiting for an Aenean messenger, a prophet, someone to bring the sacrament of Aenea’s DNA to them so that they could also become Aeneans.

“No,” the *Helix* had radioed back. “No followers of Aenea.” They then tried to explain the Amoiete Spectrum Helix and how the Aeneans had helped them build and adapt this ship for their long voyage.

After some silence, the Ousters had radioed, “Is there anyone aboard who has met Aenea or her beloved, Raul Endymion?”

Again the nine had looked blankly at each other. Saigyō, who had been sitting cross-legged on the floor some distance from the conference table, spoke up. “No one onboard met Aenea,” he said softly. “Of the Spectrum family who hid and helped Raul Endymion when he was ill on Vitus-Gray-Balianus B, two of the marriage partners were killed in the war with the Pax there—one of the mothers, Dem Ria, and the biological

father, Alem Mikail Dem Alem. Their son by that triune—a boy named Bin Ria Dem Loa Alem—was also killed in the Pax bombing. Alem Mikail's daughter by a previous triune marriage was missing and presumed dead. The surviving female of the triune, Dem Loa, took the sacrament and became an Aenean not many weeks after the Shared Moment. She farcast away from Vitus-Gray-Balianus B and never returned."

Dem Lia and the others waited, knowing that the AI wouldn't have gone on at such length if there were not more to the story.

Saigyō nodded. "It turns out that the teenaged daughter, Ces Ambre, presumed killed in the Pax Base Bombasino massacre of *Spectrum Helix* civilians, had actually been shipped offworld with more than a thousand other children and young adults. They were to be raised on the final Pax stronghold world of St. Theresa as born-again Pax Christians. Ces Ambre received the cruciform and was overseen by a cadre of religious guards there for nine years before that world was liberated by the Aeneans and Dem Loa learned that her daughter was still alive."

"Did they reunite?" asked young Den Soa, the attractive diplomat. There were tears in her eyes. "Did Ces Ambre free herself of the cruciform?"

"There was a reunion," said Saigyō. "Dem Loa freecast there as soon as she learned that her daughter was alive. Ces Ambre chose to have the Aeneans remove the cruciform, but she reported that she did not accept Aenea's DNA sacrament from her triune stepmother to become Aenean herself. Her dossier says that she wanted to return to Vitus-Gray-Balianus B to see the remnants culture from which she had been kidnapped. She continued living and working there as a teacher for almost sixty standard years. She adopted her former family's band of blue."

"She suffered the cruciform but chose not to become Aenean," muttered Kem Loi, the astronomer, as if it were impossible to believe.

Dem Lia said, "She's aboard in deep sleep."

"Yes," said Saigyō.

"How old was she when we embarked?" asked Patek Georg.

"Ninety-five standard years," said the AI. He smiled. "But as with all of us, she had the benefit of Aenean medicine in the years before departure. Her physical appearance and mental capabilities are of a woman in her early sixties."

Dem Lia rubbed her cheek. "Saigyō, please awaken Citizen Ces Ambre. Den Soa, could you be there when she awakens and explain the situation to her before the Ousters join us? They seem more interested in someone who knew Aenea's husband than in learning about the *Spectrum Helix*."

"Future husband at that point in time," corrected the ebony, Jon

Mikail, who was a bit of a pedant. “Raul Endymion was not yet married to Aenea at the time of his short stay on Vitus-Gray-Balianus B.”

“I’d feel privileged to stay with Ces Ambre until we meet the Ousters,” said Den Soa with a bright smile.

While the great mass of Ousters kept their distance—five hundred klicks—the three ambassadors were brought aboard. It had been worked out by radio that the three could take 1/10 normal gravity without discomfort, so the lovely solarium bubble just aft and above the command deck had its containment field set at that level and the proper chairs and lighting adapted. All of the Helix people thought it would be easier conversing with at least some sense of up and down. Den Soa added that the Ousters might feel at home among all the greenery there. The ship easily morphed an airlock onto the top of the great solarium bubble, and those waiting watched the slow approach of two winged Ouster and one smaller form being towed in a transparent spacesuit. The Ousters who breathed air on the ring, breathed 100% oxygen so the ship had taken care to accommodate them in the solarium. Dem Lia realized that she felt slightly euphoric as the Ouster guests entered and were shown to their specially tailored chairs, and she wondered if it was the pure O<sub>2</sub> or just the novelty of the circumstances.

Once settled in their chairs, the Ousters seemed to be studying their five Spectrum Helix counterparts—Dem Lia, Den Soa, Patek Georg, the psychologist Peter Delen Dem Tae, and Ces Ambre, an attractive woman with short white hair, her hands now folded neatly on her lap. The former teacher had insisted in dressing in her full robe and cowl of blue, but a few tabs of stiktite sewn at strategic places kept the garment from billowing at each movement or ballooning up off the floor.

The Ouster delegation was an interesting assortment of types. On the left, in the most elaborately constructed low-g chair, was a true space-adapted Ouster. Introduced as Far Rider, he was almost four meters tall—making Dem Lia feel even shorter than she was, the Spectrum Helix people always having been generally short and stocky, not through centuries on high-g planets, just because of the genetics of their founders—and the space-adapted Ouster looked far from human in many other ways. Arms and legs were mere long, spidery attachments to the thin torso. The man’s fingers must have been twenty centimeters long. Every square centimeter of his body—appearing almost naked under the skintight sweat-coolant, compression layer—was covered with a self-generated forcefield, actually an enhancement of the usual human body aura, which kept him alive in hard vacuum. The ridges above and beneath his shoulders were permanent arrays for extending his forcefield wings to catch the solar wind and magnetic fields. Far Rider’s face had been

genetically altered far from basic human stock: the eyes were black slits behind bulbous, nictitating membranes; he had no ears but a gridwork on the side of his head suggested the radio receiver; his mouth was the narrowest of slits, lipless—he communicated through radio transmitting glands in his neck.

The Spectrum Helix delegation had been aware of this Ouster adaptation and each was wearing a subtle hearplug, which in addition to picking up Far Rider's radio transmissions, allowed them to communicate with their AI's on a secure tightband.

The second Ouster was partially adapted to space, but clearly more human. Three meters tall, he was thin and spidery, but the permanent field of forcefield ectoplasmic skin was missing, his eyes and face were thin and boldly structured, he had no hair—and he spoke early Web English with very little accent. He was introduced as Chief Branchman and historian Keel Redt, and it was obvious that he was the chosen speaker for the group, if not its actual leader.

To the Chief Branchman's left was a Templar—a young woman with the hairless skull, fine bone structure, vaguely Asian features, and large eyes common to Templars everywhere—wearing the traditional brown robe and hood. She introduced herself as the True Voice of the Tree Reta Kasteen and her voice was soft and strangely musical.

When the Spectrum Helix contingent had introduced themselves, Dem Lia noticed the two Ousters and the Templar spending a few extra seconds staring at Ces Ambre, who smiled back pleasantly.

"How is it that you have come so far in such a ship?" asked Chief Branchman Keel Redt.

Dem Lia explained their decision to start a new colony of the Amoiete Spectrum Helix far from Aenean and human space. There was the inevitable question about the origins of the Amoiete Spectrum Helix culture and Dem Lia told the story as succinctly as possible.

"So if I understand you correctly," said True Voice of the Tree Reta Kasteen, the Templar, "your entire social structure is based upon an opera—a work of entertainment—that was performed only once, more than six hundred standard years ago."

"Not the *entire* social structure," Den Soa responded to her Templar counterpart. "Cultures grow and adapt themselves to changing conditions and imperatives, of course. But the basic philosophical bedrock and structure of our culture was contained in that one performance by the philosopher-composer-poet-holistic artist, Halpul Amoiete."

"And what did this...poet...think of a society being built around his single multimedia opera?" asked the Chief Branchman.

It was a delicate question, but Dem Lia just smiled and said, "We'll never know. Citizen Amoiete died in a mountain climbing accident just a

month after the opera was performed. The first Spectrum Helix communities did not appear for another twenty standard years.”

“Do you worship this man?” asked Chief Branchman Keel Redt.

Ces Ambre answered, “No. None of the Spectrum Helix people have ever deified Halpul Amoiete, even though we have taken his name as part of our society’s. We do, however, respect and try to live up to the values and goals for human potential which he communicated in his art through that single, extraordinary Spectrum Helix performance.”

The Chief Branchman nodded as if satisfied.

Saigyō’s soft voice whispered in Dem Lia’s ear. “They are broadcasting both visual and audio on a very tight coherent band which is being picked up by the Ousters outside and being rebroadcast to the forest ring.”

Dem Lia looked at the three sitting across from her, finally resting her gaze on Far Rider, the completely space-adapted Ouster. His human eyes were essentially invisible behind the gogglelike, polarized, and nictitating membranes that made him look almost insectoid. Saigyō had tracked Dem Lia’s gaze and his voice whispered in her ear again. “Yes. He is the one broadcasting.”

Dem Lia steepled her fingers and touched her lips, better to conceal the subvocalizing. “You’ve tapped into their tightbeam?”

“Yes, of course,” said Saigyō. “Very primitive. They’re broadcasting just the video and audio of this meeting, no data subchannels or return broadcasts from either the Ousters near us or from the forest ring.”

Dem Lia nodded ever so slightly. Since the *Helix* was also carrying out complete holocoverage of this meeting, including infrared study, magnetic resonance analysis of brain function, and a dozen other hidden but intrusive observations, she could hardly blame the Ousters for recording the meeting. Suddenly her cheeks reddened. Infrared. Tightbeam physical scans. Remote neuro-MRI. Certainly the fully space-adapted Ouster could see these probes—the man, if man he still was, lived in an environment where he could see the solar wind, sense the magnetic-field lines, and follow individual ions and even cosmic rays as they flowed over and under and through him in hard vacuum. Dem Lia subvocalized, “Shut down all of our solarium sensors except the holocameras.”

Saigyō’s silence was his assent.

Dem Lia noticed Far Rider suddenly blinking as if someone had shut off blazing lights that had been shining in his eyes. The Ouster then looked at Dem Lia and nodded slightly. The strange gap of a mouth, sealed away from the world by the layer of forcefield and clear ectodermal skin plasma, twitched in what the Spectrum woman thought might be a smile.

It was the young Templar, Reta Kasteen, who had been speaking. "... so you see we passed through what was becoming the Worldweb and left human space about the time the Hegemony was establishing itself. We had departed the Centauri system some time after the original Hegira had ended. Periodically, our seedship would drop into real space—the Templars joined us from God's Grove on our way out—so we had fatline news and occasional firsthand information of what the interstellar Worldweb society was becoming. We continued outbound."

"Why so far?" asked Patek Georg.

The Chief Branchman answered, "Quite simply, the ship malfunctioned. It kept us in deep cryogenic fugue for centuries while its programming ignored potential systems for an orbital worldtree. Eventually, as the ship realized its mistake—twelve hundred of us had already died in fugue crèches never designed for such a lengthy voyage—the ship panicked and began dropping out of Hawking space at every system, finding the usual assortment of stars that could not support our Templar-grown tree ring or that would have been deadly to Ousters. We know from the ship's records that it almost settled us in a binary system consisting of a black hole which was gorging on its close red giant neighbor."

"The accretion disk would have been pretty to watch," said Den Soa with a weak smile.

The Chief Branchman showed his own thin-lipped smile. "Yes, in the weeks or months we would have had before it killed us. Instead, working on the last of its reasoning power, the ship made one more jump and found the perfect solution—this double system, with the white star heliosphere we Ousters could thrive in, and a tree ring already constructed."

"How long ago was that?" asked Dem Lia.

"Twelve hundred and thirty-some standard years," broadcast Far Rider.

The Templar woman leaned forward and continued the story. "The first thing we discovered was that this forest ring had nothing to do with the biogenetics we had developed on God's Grove to build our own beautiful, secret startrees. This DNA was so alien in its alignment and function that to tamper with it might have killed the entire forest ring."

"You could have started your own forest ring growing in and around the alien one," said Ces Ambre. "Or attempted a startree sphere as other Ousters have done."

The True Voice of the Tree Reta Kasteen nodded. "We had just begun attempting that—and diversifying the protogene growth centers just a few hundred kilometers from where we had parked the seedship in the leaves and branches of the alien ring, when..." She paused as if searching for the

right words.

“The Destroyer came,” broadcast Far Rider.

“The Destroyer being the ship we observe approaching your ring now?” asked Patek Georg.

“Same ship,” broadcast Far Rider. The two syllables seemed to have been spat out.

“Same monster from hell,” added the Chief Branchman.

“It destroyed your seedship,” said Dem Lia, confirming why the Ousters seemed to have no metal and why there was no Templar-grown forest ring braiding this alien one.

Far Rider shook his head. “It *devoured* the seedship, along with more than twenty-eight thousand kilometers of the tree ring itself—every leaf, fruit, oxygen pod, water tendril—even our protogene growth centers.”

“There were far fewer purely space-adapted Ousters in those days,” said Reta Kasteen. “The adapted ones attempted to save the others, but many thousands died on that first visit of the Destroyer...the Devourer...the Machine. We obviously have many names for it.”

“Ship from hell,” said the Chief Branchman, and Dem Lia realized that he was almost certainly speaking literally, as if a religion had grown up based upon hating this machine.

“How often does it come?” asked Den Soa.

“Every fifty-seven years,” said the Templar. “Exactly.”

“From the red giant system?” said Den Soa.

“Yes,” broadcast Far Rider. “From the hell star.”

“If you know its trajectory,” said Dem Lia, “can’t you know far ahead of time the sections of your forest ring it will...devastate, devour? Couldn’t you just not colonize, or at the very least evacuate, those areas? After all, most of the tree ring has to be unpopulated...the ring’s surface area has to be equal to more than half a million Old Earths or Hyperions.”

Chief Branchman Keel Redt showed his thin smile again. “About now—some seven or eight standard days out—the Destroyer, for all its mass, not only completes its deceleration cycle, but carries out complicated maneuvers that will take it to some populated part of the ring. Always a populated area. A hundred and four years ago, its final trajectory took it to a massing of O<sub>2</sub> pods where more than twenty million of our non-fully-space-adapted Ousters had made their homes, complete with travel tubes, bridges, towers, city-sized platforms, and artificially grown life-support pods that had been under slow construction for more than six hundred standard years.”

“All destroyed,” said True Voice of the Tree Reta Kasteen with sorrow in her voice. “Devoured. Harvested.”

“Was there much loss of life?” asked Dem Lia, her voice quiet.

Far Rider shook his head and broadcast, “Millions of fully space-

adapted Ousters rallied to evacuate the oxygen-breathers. Fewer than a hundred died."

"Have you tried to communicate with the...machine?" asked Peter Delen Dem Tae.

"For centuries," said Reta Kasteen, her voice shaking with emotion. "We've used radio, tightbeam, maser, the few holo transmitters we still have, Far Rider's people have even used their wingfields—by the thousands—to flash messages in simple, mathematical code."

The five Amoiete Spectrum Helix people waited.

"Nothing," said the Chief Branchman in a flat voice. "It comes, it chooses its populated section of the ring, and it devours. We have never had a reply."

"We believe that it is completely automated and very ancient," said Reta Kasteen. "Perhaps millions of years old. Still operating on programming developed when the alien ring was built. It harvests these huge sections of the ring, limbs, branches, tubules with millions of gallons of tree-ring manufactured water...then returns to the red star system and, after a pause, returns our way again."

"We used to believe that there was a world left in that red giant system," broadcast Far Rider. "A planet which remains permanently hidden from us on the far side of that evil sun. A world which built this ring as its food source, probably before their G2 sun went giant, and which continues to harvest in spite of the misery it causes us. No longer. There is no such planet. We now believe that the Destroyer acts alone, out of ancient, blind programming, harvesting sections of the ring and destroying our settlements for no reason. Whatever or whoever lived in the red giant system has long since fled."

Dem Lia wished that Kem Loi, their astronomer was there. She knew that she was on the command deck watching. "We saw no planets during our approach to this binary system," said the green-banded commander. "It seems highly unlikely that any world that could support life would have survived the transition of the G2 star to the red giant."

"Nonetheless, the Destroyer passes very close to that terrible red star on each of its voyages," said the Ouster Chief Branchman. "Perhaps some sort of artificial environment remains—a space habitat—hollowed-out asteroids. An environment which requires this plant ring for its inhabitants to survive. But it does not excuse the carnage."

"If they had the ability to build this machine, they could have simply fled their system when the G2 sun went critical," mused Patek Georg. The red band looked at Far Rider. "Have you tried to destroy the machine?"

The lipless smile beneath the ectofield twitched lizard-wide on Far Rider's strange face. "Many times. Scores of thousands of true Ousters have died. The machine has an energy defense that lances us to ash at

approximately one hundred thousand klicks."

"That could be a simple meteor defense," said Dem Lia.

Far Rider's smile broadened so that it was very terrible. "If so, it suffices as a very efficient killing device. My father died in the last attack attempt."

"Have you tried traveling to the red giant system?" asked Peter Delen.

"We have no spacecraft left," answered the Templar.

"On your own solar wings then?" asked Peter, obviously doing the math in his head on the time such a round trip would take. Years—decades at solar sailing velocities—but well within an Ouster's life span.

Far Rider moved his hand with its elongated fingers in a horizontal chop. "The heliosphere turbulence is too great. Yet we have tried hundreds of times—expeditions upon which scores depart and none or only a few return. My brother died on such an attempt six of your standard years ago."

"And Far Rider himself was terribly hurt," said Reta Kasteen softly. "Sixty-eight of the best deep spacers left—two returned. It took all of what remains of our medical science to save Far Rider's life, and that meant two years in recovery pod nutrient for him."

Dem Lia cleared her throat. "What do you want us to do?"

The two Ousters and the Templar leaned forward. Chief Branchman Keel Redt spoke for all of them. "If, as you believe, as we have become convinced, that there is no inhabited world left in the red giant system, kill the destroyer now. Annihilate the harvesting machine. Save us from this mindless, obsolete, and endless scourge. We will reward you as handsomely as we can—foods, fruits, as much water as you need for your voyage, advanced genetic techniques, our knowledge of nearby systems, anything."

The Spectrum Helix people glanced at one another. Finally Dem Lia said, "If you are comfortable here, four of us would like to excuse ourselves for a short time to discuss this. Ces Ambre would be delighted to stay with you and talk if you so wish."

The Chief Branchman made a gesture with both long arms and huge hands. "We are completely comfortable. And we are more than delighted to have this chance to talk to the venerable M. Ambre—the woman who saw the husband of Aenea."

Dem Lia noticed that the young Templar, Reta Kasteen, looked visibly thrilled at the prospect.

"And then you will bring us your decision, yes?" radioed Far Rider, his waxy body, huge eyeshields, and alien physiology giving Dem Lia a slight chill. This was a creature that fed on light, tapped enough energy to deploy electromagnetic solar wings hundreds of kilometers wide, recycled his own air, waste, and water, and lived in an environment of absolute

cold, heat, radiation, and hard vacuum. Humankind had come a long way from the early hominids in Africa on Old Earth.

*And if we say no, thought Dem Lia, three-hundred-thousand-some angry space-adapted Ousters just like him might descend on our spinship like the angry Hawaiians venting their wrath on Captain James Cook when he caught them pulling the nails from the hull of his ship. The good captain ended up not only being killed horribly, but having his body eviscerated, burned, and boiled into small chunks.* As soon as she thought this, Dem Lia knew better. These Ousters would not attack the *Helix*. All of her intuition told her that. *And if they do, she thought, our weaponry will vaporize the lot of them in two point six seconds.* She felt guilty and slightly nauseated at her own thoughts as she made her farewells and took the lift down to the command deck with the other three.

“You saw him,” said True Voice of the Tree Reta Kasteen a little breathlessly. “Aenea’s husband?”

Ces Ambre smiled. “I was fourteen standard years old. It was a long time ago. He was traveling from world to world via farcaster and stayed a few days in my second triune parents’ home because he was ill—a kidney stone—and then the Pax troopers kept him there under arrest until they could send someone to interrogate him. My parents helped him escape. It was a very few days a very many years ago.” She smiled again. “And he was not Aenea’s husband at that time, remember. He had not taken the sacrament of her DNA, nor even grown aware of what her blood and teachings could do for the human race.”

“But you saw him,” pressed Chief Branchman Keel Redt.

“Yes. He was in delirium and pain much of the time and handcuffed to my parents’ bed by the Pax troopers.”

Reta Kasteen leaned closer. “Did he have any sort of...aura...about him?” she almost whispered.

“Oh, yes,” said Ces Ambre with a chuckle. “Until my parents gave him a sponge bath. He had been traveling hard for many days.”

The two Ousters and the Templar seemed to sit back in disappointment.

Ces Ambre leaned forward and touched the Templar woman’s knee. “I apologize for being flippant—I know the important role that Raul Endymion played in all of our history—but it was long ago, there was much confusion, and at that time on Vitus-Gray-Balianus B I was a rebellious teenager who wanted to leave my community of the Spectrum and accept the cruciform in some nearby Pax city.”

The other three visibly leaned back now. The two faces that were readable registered shock. “You wanted to accept that...that...parasite into your body?”

As part of Aenea's Shared Moment, every human everywhere had seen—had known—had felt the full *gestalt*—of the reality behind the “immortality cruciform”—a parasitic mass of AI nodes creating a TechnoCore in real space, using the neurons and synapses of each host body in any way it wished, often using it in more creative ways by *killing* the human host and using the linked neuronic web when it was at its most creative—during those final seconds of neural dissolution before death. Then the Church would use TechnoCore technology to resurrect the human body with the Core cruciform parasite growing stronger and more networked at each death and resurrection.

Ces Ambre shrugged. “It represented immortality at the time. And a chance to get a way from our dusty little village and join the real world—the Pax.”

The three Ouster diplomats could only stare.

Ces Ambre raised her hands to her robe and slipped it open enough to show them the base of her throat and the beginning of a scar where the cruciform had been removed by the Aeneans. “I was kidnapped to one of the remaining Pax worlds and put under the cruciform for nine years,” she said so softly that her voice barely carried to the three diplomats. “And most of this time was *after* Aenea’s shared moment—after the absolute revelation of the Core’s plan to enslave us with those despicable things.”

The True Voice of the Tree Reta Kasteen took Ces Ambre’s older hand in hers. “Yet you refused to become Aenean when you were liberated. You joined what was left of your old culture.”

Ces Ambre smiled. There were tears in her eyes and those eyes suddenly looked much older. “Yes. I felt I owed my people that—for deserting them at the time of crisis. Someone had to carry on the Spectrum Helix culture. We had lost so many in the wars. We lost even more when the Aeneans gave us the option of joining them. It is hard to refuse to become something like a god.”

Far Rider made a grunt that sounded like heavy static. “This is our greatest fear next to the Destroyer. No one is now alive on the forest ring who experienced the Shared Moment, but the details of it—the glorious insights into empathy and the binding powers of the Void Which Binds, Aenea’s knowledge that many of the Aeneans would be able to farcast—freecast—anywhere in the universe. Well, the Church of Aenea has grown here until at least a fourth of our population would give up their Ouster or Templar heritage and become Aenean in a second.”

Ces Ambre rubbed her cheek and smiled again. “Then it’s obvious that no Aeneans have visited this system. And you have to remember that Aenea insisted that there be no ‘Church of Aenea,’ no veneration or beatification or adoration. That was paramount in her thoughts during the Shared Moment.”

“We know,” said Reta Kasteen. “But in the absence of choice and knowledge, cultures often turn to religion. And the possibility of an Aenean being aboard with you was one reason we greeted the arrival of your great ship with such enthusiasm and trepidation.”

“Aeneans do not arrive by spacecraft,” Ces Ambre said softly.

The three nodded. “When and if the day ever comes,” broadcast Far Rider, “it will be up to the individual conscience of each Ouster and Templar to decide. As for me, I will always ride the great waves of the solar wind.”

Dem Lia and the other three returned.

“We’ve decided to help,” she said. “But we must hurry.”

There was no way in the universe that Dem Lia or any of the other eight humans or any of the five AI’s would risk the *Helix* in a direct confrontation with the “Destroyer” or the “Harvester” or whatever the hell the Ousters wanted to call their nemesis. It was not just by engineering happenstance that the 3,000 life-support pods carrying the 684,300 Spectrum Helix pioneers in deep cryogenic sleep were egg-shaped. This culture had all their eggs in one basket—literally—and they were not about to send that basket into battle. Already Basho and several of the other AI’s were brooding about the proximity to the oncoming harvesting ship. Space battles could easily be fought across 28 AU’s of distance—while traditional lasers, or lances, or charged particle beam weapons would take more than a hundred and ninety-six minutes to creep that distance—Hegemony, Pax, and Ouster ships had all developed hyperkinetic missiles able to leap into and out of Hawking drive. Ships could be destroyed before radar could announce the presence of the incoming missile. Since this “harvester” crept around its appointed rounds at sublight speed, it seemed unlikely that it would carry C-plus weaponry, but “unlikely” is a word that has undone the planning and fates of warriors since time immemorial.

At the Spectrum Helix engineers’ request, the Aeneans had rebuilt the *Helix* to be truly modular. When it reached its utopian planet around its perfect star, sections would free themselves to become probes and aircraft and landers and submersibles and space stations. Each of the three thousand individual life pods could land and begin a colony on its own, although the plans were to cluster the landing sites carefully after much study of the new world. By the time the *Helix* was finished deploying and landing its pods and modules and probes and shuttles and command deck and central fusion core, little would be left in orbit except the huge Hawking drive units with maintenance programs and robots to keep them in perfect condition for centuries, if not millennia.

“We’ll take the system exploratory probe to investigate this

Destroyer,” said Dem Lia. It was one of the smaller modules, adapted more to pure vacuum than to atmospheric entry, although it was capable of some morphing, but compared to most of the *Helix*’s peaceful subcomponents, the probe was armed to the teeth.

“May we accompany you?” said Chief Branchman Keel Redt. “None of our race has come closer than a hundred thousand kilometers to the machine and lived.”

“By all means,” said Dem Lia. “The probe’s large enough to hold thirty or forty of us, and only three are going from our ship. We will keep the internal containment field at one-tenth g and adapt the seating accordingly.”

The probe was more like one of the old combat torchships than anything else, and it accelerated out toward the advancing machine under two hundred and fifty hundred gravities, internal containment fields on infinite redundancy, external fields raised to their maximum of Class 12. Dem Lia was piloting. Den Soa was attempting to communicate with the gigantic ship via every means available, sending messages of peace on every band from primitive radio to modulated tachyon bursts. There was no response. Patek Georg Dem Mio was meshed into the defense/counterattack virtual umbilicals of his couch. The passengers sat at the rear of the probe’s compact command deck and watched. Saigyō had decided to accompany them and his massive holo sat bare chested and cross-legged on a counter near the main viewport. Dem Lia made sure to keep their trajectory aimed *not* directly at the monstrosity in the probability that it had simple meteor defenses: if they kept traveling toward their current coordinates, they would miss the ship by tens of thousands of kilometers above the plane of the ecliptic.

“Its radar has begun tracking us,” said Patek Georg when they were six hundred thousand klicks away and decelerating nicely. “Passive radar. No weapons acquisition. It doesn’t seem to be probing us with anything except simple radar. It will have no idea if life forms are aboard our probe or not.”

Dem Lia nodded. “Saigyō,” she said softly, “at two hundred thousand klicks, please bring our coordinates around so that we will be on intercept course with the thing.” The chubby monk nodded.

Somewhat later, the probes’ thrusters and main engines changed tune, the starfield rotated, and the image of the huge machine filled the main window. The view was magnified as if they were only five hundred klicks from the spacecraft. The thing was indescribably ungainly, built only for vacuum, fronted with metal teeth and rotating blades built into mandiblelike housings, the rest looking like the wreckage of an old space habitat that had been mindlessly added onto for millennium after

millennium and then covered with warts, wattles, bulbous sacs, tumors, and filaments.

"Distance, one hundred eighty-three thousand klicks and closing," said Patek Georg.

"Look how blackened it is," whispered Den Soa.

"And worn," radioed Far Rider. "None of our people have ever seen it from this close. Look at the layers of cratering through the heavy carbon deposits. It is like an ancient, black moon that has been struck again and again by tiny meteorites."

"Repaired, though," commented the Chief Branchman gruffly. "It operates."

"Distance one hundred twenty thousand klicks and closing," said Patek Georg. "Search radar has just been joined by acquisition radar."

"Defensive measures?" said Dem Lia, her voice quiet.

Saigyō answered. "Class Twelve field in place and infinitely redundant. CPB deflectors activated. Hyperkinetic countermissiles ready. Plasma shields on maximum. Countermissiles armed and under positive control." This meant simply that both Dem Lia and Patek Georg would have to give the command to launch them, or—if the human passengers were killed—Saigyō would do so.

"Distance one hundred five thousand klicks and closing," said Patek Georg. "Relative delta-v dropping to one hundred meters per second. Three more acquisition radars have locked on."

"Any other transmissions?" asked Dem Lia, her voice tight.

"Negative," said Den Soa at her virtual console. "The machine seems blind and dumb except for the primitive radar. Absolutely no signs of life aboard. Internal communications show that it has...intelligence...but not true AI. Computers more likely. Many series of physical computers."

"Physical computers!" said Dem Lia, shocked. "You mean silicon...chips...stone axe level technology?"

"Or just above," confirmed Den Soa at her console. "We're picking up magnetic bubble memory readings, but nothing higher."

"One hundred thousand klicks..." began Patek Georg and then interrupted himself. "The machine is firing on us."

The outer containment fields flashed for less than a second.

"A dozen CPB's and two crude laser lances," said Patek Georg from his virreal point of view. "Very weak. A Class One field could have countered them easily."

The containment field flickered again.

"Same combination," reported Patek. "Slightly lower energy settings."

Another flicker.

"Lower settings again," said Patek. "I think it's giving us all its got and using up its power doing it. Almost certainly just a meteor defense."

"Let's not get overconfident," said Dem Lia. "But let's see all of its defenses."

Den Soa looked shocked. "You're going to *attack* it?"

"We're going to see if we *can* attack it," said Dem Lia. "Patek, Saigyō, please target one lance on the top corner of that protuberance there..." She pointed her laser stylus at a blackened, cratered, fin-shaped projection that might have been a radiator two klicks high. "...and one hyperkinetic missile..."

"*Commander!*" protested Den Soa.

Dem Lia looked at the younger woman and raised her finger to her lips. "One hyperkinetic with plasma warhead removed, targeted at the front lower leading edge of the machine, right where the lip of that aperture is."

Patek Georg repeated the command to the AI. Actual target coordinates were displayed and confirmed.

The CPB struck almost instantly, vaporizing a seventy-meter hole in the radiator fin.

"It raised a Class Point-six field," reported Patek Georg. "That seems to be its top limit of defense."

The hyperkinetic missile penetrated the containment field like a bullet through butter and struck an instant later, blasting through sixty meters of blackened metal and tearing out through the front feeding orifice of the harvesting machine. Everyone aboard watched the silent impact and the almost mesmerizing tumble of vaporized metal expanding away from the impact site and the spray of debris from the exit wound. The huge machine did not respond.

"If we had left the warhead on," murmured Dem Lia, "and aimed for its belly, we would have a thousand kilometers of exploding harvest machine right now."

Chief Branchman Keel Redt leaned forward in his couch. Despite the one-tenth g field, all of the couches had restraint systems. His was activated now.

"Please," said the Ouster, struggling slightly against the harnesses and airbags. "Kill it now. Stop it now."

Dem Lia shifted to look at the two Ousters and the Templar. "Not yet," she said. "First we have to return to the *Helix*."

"We will lose more valuable time," broadcast Far Rider, his tone unreadable.

"Yes," said Dem Lia. "But we still have more than six standard days before it begins harvesting."

The probe accelerated away from the blackened, cratered, and newly scarred monster.

“You will not destroy it then?” demanded the Chief Branchman as the probe hurried back to the *Helix*.

“Not now,” responded Dem Lia. “It might still be serving a purpose for the race that built it.”

The young Templar seemed to be close to tears. “Yet your own instruments—far more sophisticated than our telescopes—told you that there are no worlds in the red giant system.”

Dem Lia nodded. “Yet you yourselves have mentioned the possibility of space habitats, can cities, hollowed out asteroids...our survey was neither careful nor complete. Our ship was intent upon entering your star system with maximum safety, not carrying out a careful survey of the red giant system.”

“For such a small probability,” said the Chief Branchman Ouster in a flat, hard voice, “you are willing to risk so many of our people?”

Saigyō’s voice whispered quietly in Dem Lia’s subaudio circuit. “The AI’s have been analyzing scenarios of several million Ousters using their solar wings in a concentrated attack on the *Helix*.”

Dem Lia waited, still looking at the Chief Branchman.

“The ship could defeat them,” finished the AI, “but there is some real probability of damage.”

To the Chief Branchman, Dem Lia said, “We’re going to take the *Helix* to the red giant system. The three of you are welcome to accompany us.”

“How long will the round trip last?” demanded Far Rider.

Dem Lia looked to Saigyō. “Nine days under maximum fusion boost,” said the AI. “And that would be a powered perihelion maneuver with no time to linger in the system to search every asteroid or debris field for life forms.”

The two Ousters were shaking their heads. Reta Kasteen drew her hood lower, covering her eyes.

“There’s another possibility,” said Dem Lia. To Saigyō, she pointed toward the *Helix* now filling the main viewscreen. Thousands of energy-winged Ousters parted as the probe decelerated gently through the ship’s containment field and aligned itself for docking.

They gathered in the solarium to decide. All ten of the humans—Den Soa’s wife and husband had been invited to join in the vote but had decided to stay below in the crews’ quarters—all five of the AI’s, and the three representatives of the forest-ring people. Far Rider’s tightbeam continued to carry the video and audio to the three hundred thousand nearby Ousters and the billions waiting on the great curve of tree ring beyond.

“Here is the situation,” said Dem Lia. The silence in the solarium was

very thick. “You know that the *Helix*, our ship, contains an Aenean-modified Hawking drive. Our faster-than-light passage does harm the fabric of the Void Which Binds, but thousands of times less than the old Hegemony or Pax ships. The Aeneans allowed us this voyage.” The short woman with the green-band around her turban paused and looked at both Ousters and the Templar woman before continuing. “We could reach the red giant system in...”

“Four hours to spin up to relativistic velocities, then the jump,” said Res Sandre. “About six hours to decelerate into the red giant system. Two days to investigate for life. Same ten-hour return time.”

“Which, even with some delays, would bring the *Helix* back almost two days before the Destroyer begins its harvesting. If there is no life in the red giant system, we will use the probe to destroy the robot harvester.”

“But...” said Chief Branchman Keel Redt with an all-too-human ironic smile. His face was grim.

“But it is too dangerous to use the Hawking drive in such a tight binary system,” said Dem Lia, voice level. “Such short distance jumps are incredibly tricky anyway, but given the gas and debris the red giant is pouring out...”

“You are correct. It would be folly.” It was Far Rider broadcasting on his radio band. “My clan has passed down the engineering from generation to generation. No commander of any Ouster seedship would make a jump in this binary system.”

True Voice of the Tree Reta Kasteen was looking from face to face. “But you have these powerful fusion engines...”

Dem Lia nodded. “Basho, how long to survey the red giant system using maximum thrust with our fusion engines?”

“Three and one half days transit time to the other system,” said the hollow-cheeked AI. “Two days to investigate. Three and one half days back.”

“There is no way we could shorten that?” said Oam Rai, the yellow. “Cut safety margins? Drive the fusion engines harder?”

Saigyō answered, “The nine-day round trip is posited upon ignoring all safety margins and driving the fusion engines at one hundred twelve percent of their capacity.” He sadly shook his bald head. “No, it cannot be done.”

“But the Hawking drive...” said Dem Lia and everyone in the room appeared to cease breathing except for Far Rider, who had never been breathing in the traditional sense. The appointed Spectrum Helix commander turned to the AI’s. “What are the probabilities of disaster if we try this?”

Lady Murasaki stepped forward. “Both translations—into and out of Hawking space—will be far too close to the binary system’s Roche lobe.

We estimate probability of total destruction of the *Helix* at two percent, of damage to some aspect of ship's systems at eight percent, and specifically damage to the pod life-support network at six percent."

Dem Lia looked at the Ousters and the Templar. "A six-percent chance of losing hundreds—thousands—of our sleeping relatives and friends. Those we have sworn to protect until arrival at our destination. A two-percent chance that our entire culture will die in the attempt."

Far Rider nodded sadly. "I do not know what wonders your Aenean friends have added to your equipment," he broadcast, "but I would find those figures understated. It is an impossible binary system for a Hawking drive jump."

Silence stretched. Finally Dem Lia said, "Our options are to destroy the harvesting machine for you without knowing if there is life—perhaps an entire species—depending upon it in the red giant system, however improbable. And we cannot do that. Our moral code prevents it."

Reta Kasteen's voice was very small. "We understand."

Dem Lia continued. "We could travel by conventional means and survey the system. This means you will have to suffer the ravages of this destroyer a final time, but if there is no life in the red giant system, we will destroy the machine when we return on fusion drive."

"Little comfort to the thousands or millions who will lose their homes during this final visit of the Destroyer," said Chief Branchman Keel Redt.

"No comfort at all," agreed Dem Lia.

Far Rider stood to his full four-meter height, floating slightly in the one-tenth gravity. "This is not your problem," he broadcast. "There is no reason for you to risk any of your people. We thank you for considering..."

Dem Lia raised a hand to stop him in midbroadcast. "We're going to vote now. We're voting whether to jump to the red giant system via Hawking drive and get back here before your Destroyer begins destroying. If there is an alien race over there, perhaps we can communicate in the two days we will have in-system. Perhaps they can reprogram their machine. We have all agreed that the odds against it accidentally 'eating' your seedship on its first pass after you landed are infinitesimal. The fact that it constantly harvests areas on which you've colonized—on a tree ring with the surface area equal to half a million Hyperions—suggests that it is programmed to do so, as if eliminating abnormal growths or pests."

The three diplomats nodded.

"When we vote," said Dem Lia, "the decision will have to be unanimous. One 'no' vote means that we will not use the Hawking drive."

Saigyō had been sitting cross-legged on the table, but now he moved next to the other four AI's who were standing. "Just for the record," said

the fat little monk, “the AI’s have voted five to zero against attempting a Hawking drive maneuver.”

Dem Lia nodded. “Noted,” she said. “But just for the record, for this sort of decision, the AI’s vote does not count. Only the Amoiete Spectrum Helix people or their representatives can determine their own fate.” She turned back to the other nine humans. “To use the Hawking drive or not? Yes or no? We ten will account to the thousands of others for the consequences. Ces Ambre?”

“Yes.” The woman in the blue robe appeared as calm as her startlingly clear and gentle eyes.

“Jon Mikail Dem Alem?”

“Yes,” said the ebony life-support specialist in a thick voice. “Yes.”

“Oam Rai?”

The yellow-band woman hesitated. No one onboard knew the risks to the ship’s systems better than this person. A two-percent chance of destruction must seem an obscene gamble to her. She touched her lips with her fingers. “There are two civilizations we are deciding for here,” she said, obviously musing to herself. “Possibly three.”

“Oam Rai?” repeated Dem Lia.

“Yes,” said Oam Rai.

“Kem Loi?” said Dem Lia to the astronomer.

“Yes.” The young woman’s voice quavered slightly.

“Patek Georg Dem Mio?”

The red-band security specialist grinned. “Yes. As the ancient saying goes, no guts, no glory.”

Dem Lia was irritated. “You’re speaking for 684,288 sleeping people who might not be so devil-may-care.”

Patek Georg’s grin stayed in place. “My vote is yes.”

“Dr. Samel Ria Kem Ali?”

The medic looked as troubled as Patek had brazen. “I must say...there are so many unknowns...” He looked around. “Yes,” he said. “We must be sure.”

“Peter Delen Dem Tae?” Dem Lia asked the blue-banded psychologist.

The older man had been chewing on a pencil. He looked at it, smiled, and set it on the table. “Yes.”

“Res Sandre?”

For a second the other green-band woman’s eyes seemed to show defiance, almost anger. Dem Lia steeled herself for the veto and the lecture that would follow.

“Yes,” said Res Sandre. “I believe it’s a moral imperative.”

That left the youngest in the group.

“Den Soa?” said Dem Lia.

The young woman had to clear her throat before speaking. “Yes. Let’s go look.”

All eyes turned to the appointed commander.

“I vote yes,” said Dem Lia. “Saigyō, prepare for maximum acceleration toward the translation point to Hawking drive. Kem Loi, you and Res Sandre and Oam Rai work on the optimum inbound translation point for a systemwide search for life. Chief Branchman Redt, Far Rider, True Voice of the Tree Kasteen, if you would prefer to wait behind, we will prepare the airlock now. If you three wish to come, we must leave immediately.”

The Chief Branchman spoke without consulting the others. “We wish to accompany you, Citizen Dem Lia.”

She nodded. “Far Rider, tell your people to clear a wide wake. We’ll angle above the plane of the ecliptic outward bound, but our fusion tail is going to be fierce as a dragon’s breath.”

The full space-adapted Ouster broadcast, “I have already done so. Many are looking forward to the spectacle.”

Dem Lia grunted softly. “Let’s hope it’s not more of a spectacle than we’ve all bargained for,” she said.

The *Helix* made the jump safely, with only minor upset to a few of the ship’s subsystems. At a distance of three AU’s from the surface of the red giant, they surveyed the system. They had estimated two days, but the survey was done in less than twenty-four hours.

There were no hidden planets, no planetoids, no hollowed-out asteroids, no converted comets, no artificial space habitats—no sign of life whatsoever. When the G2 star had finished its evolution into a red giant at least three million years earlier, its helium nuclei began burning its own ash in a high-temperature second round of fusion reactions at the star’s core while the original hydrogen fusion continued in a thin shell far from that core, the whole process creating carbon and oxygen atoms that added to the reaction and...presto...the short-lived rebirth of the star as a red giant. It was obvious that there had been no outer planets, no gas giants, no rocky worlds beyond the new red sun’s reach. Any inner planets had been swallowed whole by the expanding star. Outgassing of dust and heavy radiation had all but cleared the solar system of anything larger than nickel-iron meteorites.

“So,” said Patek Georg. “That’s that.”

“Shall I authorize the AI’s to begin full acceleration toward the return translation point?” said Res Sandre.

The Ouster diplomats had been moved to the command deck with their specialized couches. No one minded the one-tenth gravity on the bridge because each of the Amoiete Spectrum specialists—with the

exception of Ces Ambre—was enmeshed in a control couch and in touch with the ship on a variety of levels. The Ouster diplomats had been silent during most of the search and they remained silent now as they turned to look at Dem Lia at her center console.

The elected commander tapped her lower lip with her knuckle. “Not quite yet.” Their searches had brought them all around the red giant and now they were less than one AU from its broiling surface. “Saigyō, have you looked inside the star?”

“Just enough to sample it,” came the AI’s affable voice. “Typical for a red giant at this stage. Solar luminosity is about two thousand times that of its G8 companion. We sampled the core—no surprises. The helium nuclei there are obviously engaged despite their mutual electrical repulsion.”

“What is its surface temperature?” asked Dem Lia.

“Approximately 3,000 degrees Kelvin” came Saigyō’s voice. “About half of what the surface temperature had been when it was a G2 sun.”

“Oh, my God,” whispered the violet-band Kem Loi from her couch in the astronomy station nexus. “Are you thinking...”

“Deep radar the star, please,” said Dem Lia.

The graphics holos appeared less than twenty minutes later as the star turned and they orbited it. Saigyō said, “A single rocky world. Still in orbit. Approximately four-fifths Old Earth’s size. Radar evidence of ocean bottoms and former riverbeds.”

Samel—Dr. Sam—said, “It was probably Earthlike until its expanding sun boiled away its seas and evaporated its atmosphere. God help whoever or whatever lived there.”

“How deep in the sun’s troposphere is it?” asked Dem Lia.

“Less than a hundred and fifty thousand kilometers,” said Saigyō.

Dem Lia nodded. “Raise the containment fields to maximum,” she said softly. “Let’s go visit them.”

*It’s like swimming under the surface of a red sea,* Dem Lia thought as they approached the rocky world. Above them, the outer atmosphere of the star swirled and spiraled, tornadoes of magnetic fields rose from the depths and dissipated, and the containment field was already glowing despite the thirty micromonofilament cables they had trailed out a hundred and sixty thousand klicks behind them to act as radiators.

For an hour the *Helix* stood off less than twenty thousand kilometers from what was left of what could once have been Old Earth or Hyperion. Various sensors showed the rocky world through the swirling red murk.

“A cinder,” said Jon Mikail Dem Alem.

“A cinder filled with life,” said Kem Loi at the primary sensing nexus. She brought up the deep radar holo. “Absolutely honeycombed. Internal

oceans of water. At least three billion sentient entities. I have no idea if they're humanoid, but they have machines, transport mechanisms, and citylike hives. You can even see the docking port where their harvester puts in every fifty-seven years."

"But still no understandable contact?" asked Dem Loi. The *Helix* had been broadcasting basic mathematical overtures on every bandwidth, spectrum, and communications technology the ship had—from radio maser to modulated tachyons. There had been a return broadcast of sorts.

"Modulated gravity waves," explained Ikkyu. "But not responding to our mathematical or geometrical overtures. They are picking up our electromagnetic signals but not understanding them, and we can't decipher their gravitonic pulses."

"How long to study the modulations until we can find a common alphabet?" demanded Dem Lia.

Ikkyu's lined face looked pained. "Weeks, at least. Months more likely. Possibly years." The AI returned the disappointed gaze of the humans, Ousters, and Templar. "I am sorry," he said, opening his hands. "Humankind has only contacted two sentient alien races before, and *they* both found ways to communicate with *us*. These...beings...are truly alien. There are too few common referents."

"We can't stay here much longer," said Res Sandre at her engineering nexus. "Powerful magnetic storms are coming up from the core. And we just can't dissipate the heat quickly enough. We have to leave."

Suddenly Ces Ambre, who had a couch but no station or duties, stood, floated a meter above the deck in the one-tenth g, moaned, and slowly floated to the deck in a dead faint.

Dr. Sam reached her a second before Dem Lia and Den Soa. "Everyone else stay at your stations," said Dem Lia.

Ces Ambre opened her startlingly blue eyes. "They are so *different*. Not human at all...oxygen breathers but not like the Seneschai empath...modular...multiple minds...so fibrous..."

Dem Lia held the older woman. "Can you communicate with *them*?" she said urgently. "Send *them* images?"

Ces Ambre nodded weakly.

"Send them the image of their harvesting machine and the Ousters," said Dem Lia sternly. "Show them the damage their machine does to the Ouster city clusters. Show them that the Ousters are...human...sentient. Squatters, but not harming the forest ring."

Ces Ambre nodded again and closed her eyes. A moment later she began weeping. "They...are...so...sorry," she whispered. "The machine brings back no...pictures...only the food and air and water. It is programmed...as you suggested, Dem Lia...to eliminate infestations. They are...so...so...sorry for the loss of Ouster life. They offer the

suicide of...of their species...if it would atone for the destruction.”

“No, no, no,” said Dem Lia, squeezing the crying woman’s hands. “Tell them that won’t be necessary.” She took the older woman by the shoulders. “This will be difficult, Ces Ambre, but you have to ask them if the harvester can be reprogrammed. Taught to stay away from the Ouster settlements.”

Ces Ambre closed her eyes for several minutes. At one point it looked as if she had stopped breathing. Then those lovely eyes opened wide. “It can. They are sending the reprogramming data.”

“We are receiving modulated graviton pulses,” said Saigyō. “Still no translation possible.”

“We don’t need a translation,” said Dem Lia, breathing deeply. She lifted Ces Ambre and helped her back to her couch. “We just have to record it and repeat it to the *Destroyer* when we get back.” She squeezed Ces Ambre’s hand again. “Can you communicate our thanks and farewell?”

The woman smiled. “I have done so. As best I can.”

“Saigyō,” said Dem Lia. “Get us the hell out of here and accelerate full speed to the translation point.”

The *Helix* survived the Hawking space jump back into the G8 system with no damage. The *Destroyer* had already altered its trajectory toward populated regions of the forest ring, but Den Soa broadcast the modulated graviton recordings while they were still decelerating, and the giant harvester responded with an indecipherable gravitonic rumble of its own and dutifully changed course toward a remote and unpopulated section of the ring. Far Rider used his tightbeam equipment to show them a holo of the rejoicing on the ring cities, platforms, pods, branches, and towers, and then he shut down his broadcast equipment.

They had gathered in the solarium. None of the AI’s were present or listening, but the humans, Ousters, and Templar sat in a circle. All eyes were on Ces Ambre. That woman’s eyes were closed.

Den Soa said very quietly, “The beings...on that world...they had to build the tree ring before their star expanded. They built the harvesting spacecraft. Why didn’t they just...leave?”

“The planet was...is...home,” whispered Ces Ambre, her eyes still shut tight. “Like children...not wanting to leave home...because it’s dark out there. Very dark...empty. They love...*home*.” The older woman opened her eyes and smiled wanly.

“Why didn’t you tell us that you were Aenean?” Dem Lia said softly.

Ces Ambre’s jaw set in resolve. “I am *not* Aenean. My mother, Dem Loa, gave me the sacrament of Aenea’s blood—through her own, of course—after rescuing me from the hell of St. Theresa. But I decided *not*

to use the Aenean abilities. I chose *not* to follow the others, but to remain with the Amoiete.”

“But you communicated telepathically with...” began Patek Georg.

Ces Ambre shook her head and interrupted quickly. “It is *not* telepathy. It is...being connected...to the Void Which Binds. It is hearing the language of the dead and of the living across time and space through pure empathy. Memories not one’s own.” The ninety-five-year-old woman who looked middle-aged put her hand on her brow. “It is so tiring. I fought for so many years not to pay attention to the voices...to join in the memories. That is why the cryogenic deep sleep is so...restful.”

“And the other Aenean abilities?” Dem Lia asked, her voice still very soft. “Have you freecast?”

Ces Ambre shook her head with her hand still shielding her eyes. “I did not want to *learn* the Aenean secrets,” she said. Her voice sounded very tired.

“But you could if you wanted to,” said Den Soa, her voice awestruck. “You could take one step—freecast—and be back on Vitus-Gray-Balianus B or Hyperion or Tau Ceti Center or Old Earth in a second, couldn’t you?”

Ces Ambre lowered her hand and looked fiercely at the young woman. “But I *won’t*.”

“Are you continuing with us in deep sleep to our destination?” asked the other green-band, Res Sandre. “To our final Spectrum Helix colony?”

“Yes,” said Ces Ambre. The single word was a declaration and a challenge.

“How will we tell the others?” asked Jon Mikail Dem Alem. “Having an Aenean...a potential Aenean...in the colony will change...everything.”

Dem Lia stood. “In my final moments as your consensus-elected commander, I could make this an order, Citizens. Instead, I ask for a vote. I feel that Ces Ambre and only Ces Ambre should make the decision as to whether or not to tell our fellow Spectrum Helix family about her...gift. At any time after we reach our destination.” She looked directly at Ces Ambre. “Or never, if you so choose.”

Dem Lia turned to look at each of the other eight. “And we shall never reveal the secret. Only Ces Ambre has the right to tell the others. Those in favor of this, say aye.”

It was unanimous.

Dem Lia turned to the standing Ousters and Templar. “Saigyo assures me that none of this was broadcast on your tightbeam.”

Far Rider nodded.

“And your recording of Ces Ambre’s contact with the aliens through the Void Which Binds?”

“Destroyed,” broadcast the four-meter Ouster.

Ces Ambre stepped closer to the Ousters. “But you still want some of my blood...some of Aenea’s sacramental DNA. You still want the choice.”

Chief Branchman Keel Redt’s long hands were shaking. “It would not be for us to decide to release the information or allow the sacrament to be distributed...the Seven Councils would have to meet in secret...the Church of Aenea would be consulted...or...” Obviously the Ouster was in pain at the thought of millions or billions of his fellow Ousters leaving the forest ring forever, freecasting away to human-Aenean space or elsewhere. Their universe would never be the same. “But the three of us do not have the right to reject it for everyone.”

“But we hesitate to ask...” began the True Voice of the Tree Reta Kasteen.

Ces Ambre shook her head and motioned to Dr. Samel. The medic handed the Templar a small quantity of blood in a shockproof vial. “We drew it just a while ago,” said the doctor.

“You must decide,” said Ces Ambre. “That is always the way. That is always the curse.”

Chief Branchman Keel Redt stared at the vial for a long moment before he took it in his still-shaking hands and carefully set it away in a secure pouch on his Ouster forcefield armor. “It will be interesting to see what happens,” said the Ouster.

Dem Lia smiled. “That’s an ancient Old Earth curse, you know. Chinese. ‘May you live in interesting times.’”

Saigyō morphed the airlock and the Ouster diplomats were gone, sailing back to the forest ring with the hundreds of thousands of other beings of light, tacking against the solar wind, following magnetic lines of force like vessels of light carried by swift currents.

“If you all don’t mind,” said Ces Ambre, smiling, “I’m going to return to my deep-sleep crèche and turn in. It’s been a long couple of days.”

The originally awakened nine waited until the *Helix* had successfully translated into Hawking space before returning to deep sleep. When they were still in the G8 system, accelerating up and away from the ecliptic and the beautiful forest ring which now eclipsed the small white sun, Oam Rai pointed to the stern window and said, “Look at that.”

The Ousters had turned out to say good-bye. Several billion wings of pure energy caught the sunlight.

A day into Hawking drive while conferring with the AI’s was enough to establish that the ship was in perfect form, the spin arms and deep-sleep pods functioning as they should, that they had returned to course, and that all was well. One by one, they returned to their crèches—first Den Soa and her mates, then the others. Finally only Dem Lia remained awake,

sitting up in her crèche in the seconds before it was to be closed.

“Saigyō,” she said and it was obvious from her voice that it was a summons.

The short, fat Buddhist monk appeared.

“Did you know that Ces Ambre was Aenean, Saigyō?”

“No, Dem Lia.”

“How could you not? The ship has complete genetic and med profiles on every one of us. You must have known.”

“No, Dem Lia, I assure you that Citizen Ces Ambre’s med profiles were within normal *Spectrum Helix* limits. There was no sign of posthumanity Aenean DNA. Nor clues in her psych profiles.”

Dem Lia frowned at the hologram for a moment. Then she said, “Forged bio records then? Ces Ambre or her mother could have done that.”

“Yes, Dem Lia.”

Still propped on one elbow, Dem Lia said, “To your knowledge—to any of the AI’s knowledge—are there other Aeneans aboard the *Helix*, Saigyō?”

“To our knowledge, no,” said the plump monk, his face earnest.

Dem Lia smiled. “Aenea taught that evolution had a direction and determination,” she said softly, more to herself than to the listening AI. “She spoke of a day when all the universe would be green with life. Diversity, she taught, is one of evolution’s best strategies.”

Saigyō nodded and said nothing.

Dem Lia lay back on her pillow. “We thought the Aeneans so generous in helping us preserve our culture—this ship—the distant colony. I bet the Aeneans have helped a thousand small cultures cast off from human space into the unknown. They want the diversity—the Ousters, the others. They want many of us to pass up their gift of godhood.”

She looked at the AI, but the Buddhist monk’s face showed only his usual slight smile. “Good night, Saigyō. Take good care of the ship while we sleep.” She pulled the top of the crèche shut and the unit began cycling her into deep cryogenic sleep.

“Yes, Dem Lia,” said the monk to the now sleeping woman.

The *Helix* continued its great arc through Hawking space. The spin arms and life pods wove their complex double helix against the flood of false colors and four-dimensional pulsations which had replaced the stars.

Inside the ship, the AI’s had turned off the containment field gravity and the atmosphere and the lights. The ship moved on in darkness.

Then, one day, about three months after leaving the binary system, the ventilators hummed, the lights flickered on, and the containment field

gravity activated. All 684,300 of the colonists slept on.

Suddenly three figures appeared in the main walkway halfway between the command center bridge and the access portals to the first ring of life pod arms. The central figure was more than three meters tall, spiked and armored, bound about with chrome razorwire. Its faceted eyes gleamed red. It remained motionless where it had suddenly appeared.

The figure on the left was a man in early middle-age, with curly graying hair, dark eyes, and pleasant features. He was very tan and wore a soft blue cotton shirt, green shorts, and sandals. He nodded at the woman and began walking toward the command center.

The woman was older, visibly old even despite Aenean medical techniques, and she wore a simple gown of flawless blue. She walked to the access portal, took the lift up the third spin arm, and followed the walkway down into the one-g environment of the life pod. Pausing by one of the crèches, she brushed ice and condensation from the clear face plate of the umbilically monitored sarcophagus.

“Ces Ambre,” muttered Dem Loa, her fingers on the chilled plastic centimeters above her triune stepdaughter’s lined cheek. “Sleep well, my darling. Sleep well.”

On the command deck, the tall man was standing among the virtual AI’s.

“Welcome, Petyr, son of Aenea and Endymion,” said Saigō with a slight bow.

“Thank you, Saigō. How are you all?”

They told him in terms beyond language or mathematics. Petyr nodded, frowned slightly, and touched Basho’s shoulder. “There are too many conflicts in you, Basho? You wished them reconciled?”

The tall man in the coned hat and muddy clogs said, “Yes, please, Petyr.”

The human squeezed the AI’s shoulder in a friendly embrace. Both closed their eyes for an instant.

When Petyr released him, the saturnine Basho smiled broadly. “Thank you, Petyr.”

The human sat on the edge of the table and said, “Let’s see where we’re headed.”

A holocube four meters by four meters appeared in front of them. The stars were recognizable. The *Helix*’s long voyage out from human-Aenean space was traced in red. Its projected trajectory proceeded ahead in blue dashes—blue dashes extending toward the center of the galaxy.

Petyr stood, reached into the holocube, and touched a small star just to the right of the projected path of the *Helix*. Instantly that section magnified.

“This might be an interesting system to check out,” said the man with

a comfortable smile. “Nice G2 star. The fourth planet is about a seven point six on the old Solmev Scale. It would be higher, but it has evolved some very nasty viruses and some very fierce animals. Very fierce.”

“Six hundred eighty-five light-years,” noted Saigyō. “Plus forty-three light-years course correction. Soon.”

Petyr nodded.

Lady Murasaki moved her fan in front of her painted face. Her smile was provocative. “And when we arrive, Petyr-san, will the nasty viruses somehow be gone?”

The tall man shrugged. “Most of them, my Lady. Most of them.” He grinned. “But the fierce animals will still be there.” He shook hands with each of the AI’s. “Stay safe, my friends. And keep our friends safe.”

Petyr trotted back to the nine-meter chrome-and-bladed nightmare in the main walkway just as Dem Loa’s soft gown swished across the carpeted deckplates to join him.

“All set?” asked Petyr.

Dem Loa nodded.

The son of Aenea and Raul Endymion set his hand against the monster standing between them, laying his palm flat next to a fifteen-centimeter curved thorn. The three disappeared without a sound.

The *Helix* shut off its containment field gravity, stored its air, turned off its interior lights, and continued on in silence, making the tiniest of course corrections as it did so.

## INTRODUCTION TO “REMEMBERING SIRI”

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I’m interested in how few writers cross the osmotic boundaries between science fiction and horror, between genre and what those in genre call mainstream. Or, rather, I should say that I’m fascinated with how many cross and do not return.

Part of it, I think, is the vast difference in states of mind between dreaming the dark dreams of horror and constructing the rational structures of SF, or between tripping the literary light fantastic and being shackled by the gravity of “serious” fiction. It is hard to do both—painful to the psyche to allow one hemisphere to become dominant while bludgeoning the other into submission. Perhaps that’s why readership of SF and horror, genre and New Yorker fiction overlap less than one would think.

Whatever the reason, it’s a pity that more writers feel constrained—sometimes by limitations of talent or interest but more frequently by market considerations and the simple fact that they find *success* in one field—to stay in one genre.

Of course, the exceptions are always interesting. George R.R. Martin moves easily between genres and expectations, rarely repeating, always surprising. Dean Koontz left SF just as he was becoming a star there—possibly because he sensed his destiny lay in becoming a supernova elsewhere. Edward Bryant took a “sabbatical” from SF a few years ago and has been producing world-class horror ever since. Kurt Vonnegut and Ursula K. LeGuin “graduated” from SF to mainstream acceptance. (To Vonnegut’s credit for honesty if nothing else, he allows as to how he gets nostalgic every once in a while, opens the lowest desk drawer where he keeps his old pulp SF efforts, and then urinates into it.) Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood and others write their most memorable fiction in SF, but they deny any association with the field. Neither lady mentions urinating into desk drawers, but one suspects that they would feel a certain pressure on their respective bladders if forced to accept a Hugo or Nebula.

Harlan Ellison simply refused ever to be nailed down to a genre—

even while he revolutionized them. We all have heard the stories where Ellison suffers the ten-millionth reporter or critic or TV personality who is demanding to know what descriptive word comes before “writer” in this case. Sci-fi? Fantasy? Horror?

“What’s wrong with just ... *writer*?” Ellison says softly in his most cordial cobra hiss.

Well, what’s wrong with it is that the semiliterate have feeble but tidy little minds filled with tidy little boxes, and no matter how much one struggles, the newspaper article (or review, or radio intro, or TV superimposed title) will read something akin to—“SCI-FI GUY SAYS HIS SCI-FI STUFF NOT SCI-FI.”

And the next step is for someone to stand up at a convention (sorry, a Con), grab the microphone, and shout—“How come you’re always saying in interviews and stuff that you’re not just a science fiction writer? I’m proud to be associated with science fiction!” (Or horror. Or fantasy. Or ... fill in the blank.)

The crowd roars, righteousness fills the air, hostility lies just under the surface as if you’re a black at a Huey Newton rally who’s been caught “passing”—revealed as an oreo, or a Jew in the Warsaw ghetto who’s been caught helping the Nazis with the railroad timetables, or—worse yet, a Dead Head at a Grateful D. concert who’s been found listening to Mozart on his Walkman.

I mean, you *are* at this guy’s convention. (Sorry, “Con.”)

How do you explain to the guy gripping the mike that there are a thousand pressures forcing a writer down narrower and narrower alleys—agents trying to make you marketable and pulling their hair out because you insist on staying a jump ahead of a readership, publishers trying to shape you into a commodity, editors trying to get you to Chrissakes be consistent for once, booksellers complaining because your new SF novel just came out and it looks silly racked with your World Fantasy Award winning novel (which is really about Calcutta and has no fantasy in it), which, in turn, is next to your Sci-Fi opus and your fat horror novel (it is horror, isn’t it? There wasn’t any blood or holograms or demon-eyed kids on the cover ...) and now ... NOW!... this new book has come out ... this *thing* ... and it looks, oh sweet Christ, it looks ... MAINSTREAM!

How do you explain that every modifier before writer becomes another nail in the coffin of your hopes of writing what you want? What you care about?

So you look at the guy with the mike and you stare down the irate booksellers and you put your editor on hold, and you think—I *can explain*. *I can tell them that the one wonderful thing about being a writer is the freedom to explore all venues, the luxury...no, the responsibility...to work with the dreams the Muse sends you, to shape*

*them to the best of your ability and to send them along whether a guaranteed readership is waiting or not; I can explain the compulsion to write a good book whether the cover artist knows what to do with it or not, explain the honor involved in trying new things despite the fact that the manager at the local B. Dalton's has racked your most recent novel in OCCULT NON-FICTION and asked ... no, ordered the distributor not to send any more books written by this obvious schizophrenic. I can explain all that. I can take every single reader, every defensive SF chauvinist and horror fan and snooty New York reviewer and sparrowfart reader of "serious fiction," and show them what being a writer means!*

And then you look out at the guy with the mike, and you think—*Nahhh.* And you say, “My next book’ll be SF.”

The next story is SF. I loved writing it. I loved returning to this universe when I finally used “Remembering Siri” as a starting point to write the 1,500 or so pages of *HYPERION* and *THE FALL OF HYPERION*.

Oh, and the seed crystal for this tale was the thought one night, while dozing off, *What if Romeo and Juliet had lived?*

You know—Romeo and Juliet? By that sci-fi/fantasy/ horror hack who wrote sit-coms and historical soap operas in his spare time?

Watch for the allusions. And the illusions.

## REMEMBERING SIRI

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I climb the steep hill to Siri's tomb on the day the islands return to the shallow seas of the Equatorial Archipelago. The day is perfect and I hate it for being so. The sky is as tranquil as tales of Old Earth's seas, the shallows are dappled with ultramarine tints, and a warm breeze blows in from the sea to ripple the russet willowgrass on the hillside near me.

Better low clouds and gray gloom on such a day. Better mist or a shrouding fog which sets the masts in Firstsite Harbor dripping and raises the lighthouse horn from its slumbers. Better one of the great sea-simoons blowing up out of the cold belly of the south, lashing before it the motile isles and their dolphin herders until they seek refuge in lee of our atolls and stony peaks.

Anything would be better than this warm spring day when the sun moves through a vault of sky so blue that it makes me want to run, to jump in great loping arcs, and to roll in the soft grass as Siri and I have done at just this spot.

Just this spot. I pause to look around me. The willowgrass bends and ripples like the fur of some great beast as the salt-tinged breeze gusts up out of the south. I shield my eyes and search the horizon but nothing moves there. Out beyond the lava reef, the sea begins to chop and lift itself in nervous strokes.

"Siri," I whisper. I say her name without meaning to do so. A hundred meters down the slope, the crowd pauses to watch me and to catch its collective breath. The procession of mourners and celebrants stretches for more than a kilometer to where the white buildings of the city begin. I can make out the gray and balding head of my younger son in the vanguard. He is wearing the blue and gold robes of the Hegemony. I know that I should wait for him, walk with him, but he and the other aging council members can not keep up with my young, shiptrained muscles and steady stride. Decorum dictates that I should walk with him and my granddaughter Lira and the other ladies of the society.

To hell with it. And to hell with them.

I turn and jog up the steep hillside. Sweat begins to soak my loose cotton shirt before I reach the curving summit of the ridge and catch sight of the tomb.

### *Siri's tomb.*

I stop. The wind chills me although the sunlight is warm enough as it glints off the flawless white stone of the silent mausoleum. The grass is high near the sealed entrance to the crypt. Rows of faded festival pennants on ebony staffs line the narrow gravel path.

Hesitating, I circle the tomb and approach the steep cliff edge a few meters beyond. The willowgrass is bent and trampled here where irreverent picnickers have laid their blankets. There are several fire rings formed from the perfectly round, perfectly white stones purloined from the border of the gravel path.

I cannot stop a smile. I know the view from here; the great curve of the outer harbor with its natural seawall, the low, white buildings of Firstsite, and the colorful hulls and masts of the catamarans bobbing at anchorage. Near the pebble beach beyond Common Hall, a young woman in a white skirt moves toward the water. For a second I think that it is Siri and my heart pounds. I half prepare to throw up my arms in response to her wave but she does not wave. I watch in silence as the distant figure turns away and is lost in the shadows of the old boat building.

Above me, far out from the cliff, a wide-winged Thomas Hawk circles above the lagoon on rising thermals and scans the shifting bluekelp beds with its infrared vision, seeking out harpseals or torpids. *Nature is stupid*, I think and sit in the soft grass. Nature sets the stage all wrong for such a day and then it is insensitive enough to throw in a bird searching for prey which have long since fled the polluted waters near the growing city.

I remember another Thomas Hawk on that first night when Siri and I came to this hilltop. I remember the moonlight on its wings and the strange, haunting cry which echoed off the cliff and seemed to pierce the dark air above the gaslights of the village below.

Siri was sixteen ... no, not quite sixteen ... and the moonlight that touched the hawk's wings above us also painted her bare skin with milky light and cast shadows beneath the soft circles of her breasts. We looked up guiltily when the bird's cry cut the night and Siri said, "It was the nightingale and not the lark,/That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear."

"Huh?" I said. Siri was almost sixteen. I was nineteen. But Siri knew the slow pace of books and the cadences of theater under the stars. I knew only the stars.

"Relax, young Shipman," she whispered and pulled me down beside her then. "It's only an old Tom's Hawk hunting. Stupid bird. Come back, Shipman. Come back, Merin."

The *Los Angeles* had chosen that moment to rise above the horizon

and to float like a wind-blown ember west across the strange constellations of Maui-Covenant, Siri's world. I lay next to her and described the workings of the great C-plus spinship which was catching the high sunlight against the drop of night above us, and all the while my hand was sliding lower along her smooth side, her skin seemed all velvet and electricity, and her breath came more quickly against my shoulder. I lowered my face to the hollow of her neck, to the sweat-and-perfume essence of her tousled hair.

"Siri," I say and this time her name is not unbidden. Below me, below the crest of the hill and the shadow of the white tomb, the crowd stands and shuffles. They are impatient with me. They want me to unseal the tomb, to enter, and to have my private moment in the cool silent emptiness that has replaced the warm presence that was Siri. They want me to say my farewells so they can get on with their rites and rituals, open the waiting farcaster doors, and join the waiting worldweb of the Hegemony.

To hell with that. And to hell with them.

I pull up a tendril of the thickly woven willowgrass, chew on the sweet stem, and watch the horizon for the first sign of the migrating islands. The shadows are still long in the morning light. The day is young. I will sit here for awhile and remember.

I will remember Siri.

Siri was a ... what?... a bird, I think, the first time I saw her. She was wearing some sort of mask with bright feathers. When she removed it to join in the raceme quadrille, the torchlight caught the deep auburn tints of her hair. She was flushed, cheeks aflame, and even from across the crowded Common I could see the startling green of her eyes contrasting with the summer heat of her face and hair. It was Festival Night, of course. The torches danced and sparked to the stiff breeze coming in off the harbor and the sound of the flutists on the breakwall playing for the passing isles was almost drowned out by surf sounds and the crack of pennants snapping in the wind. Siri was almost sixteen and her beauty burned more brightly than any of the torches set round the throng-filled square. I pushed through the dancing crowd and went to her.

It was five years ago for me.

It was more than sixty-five years ago for us. It seems only yesterday.

This is not going well.

Where to start?

"What say we go find a little nooky, kid?" Mike Osho was speaking. Short, squat, his pudgy face a clever caricature of a Buddha, Mike was a

god to me then. We were all gods: long-lived if not immortal, well-paid if not quite divine. The Hegemony had chosen us to help crew one of its precious quantum leap C-plus spinships, so how could we be less than gods? It was just that Mike, brilliant, mercurial, irreverent Mike, was a little older and a little higher in the Shipboard pantheon than young Merin Aspic.

“Hah. Zero probability of that,” I said. We were scrubbing up after a twelve-hour shift with the farcaster construction crew. Shuttling the workers around their chosen singularity-point some 163,000 kilometers out from Maui-Covenant was a lot less glamorous for us than the four month leap from Hegemony-space. During the C-plus portion of the trip we had been master specialists; forty-nine starship experts shepherding some two hundred nervous passengers. Now the passengers had their hardsuits on and we Shipmen had been reduced to serving as glorified truck drivers as the construction crew wrestled the bulky singularity containment-sphere into place.

“Zero probability,” I repeated. “Unless the groundlings have added a whorehouse to that quarantine island they leased us.”

“Nope. They haven’t,” grinned Mike. He and I had our three days of planetary R-and-R coming up, but we knew from Shipmaster Singh’s briefings and the moans of our Shipmates that the only groundtime we had to look forward to would be spent on a 7 by 4-mile island administered by the Hegemony. It wasn’t even one of the motile isles we had heard about, just another volcanic peak near the equator. Once there, we could count on real gravity underfoot, unfiltered air to breathe, and the chance to taste unsynthesized food. But we could also count on the fact that the only intercourse we would have with the Maui-Covenant colonists would be through buying local artifacts at the duty-free store. Even those were sold by Hegemony trade specialists. Many of our Shipmates had chosen to spend their R-and-R on the *Los Angeles*.

“So how do we find a little nooky, Mike? The colonies are off limits until the farcaster’s working. That’s about 60 years away, local time. Or are you talking about Meg in Spincomp?”

“Stick with me, kid,” said Mike. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

I stuck with Mike. There were only five of us in the dropship. It was always a thrill to me to fall out of high orbit into the atmosphere of a real world. Especially a world that looked as much like Old Earth as Maui-Covenant did. I stared at the blue and white limb of the planet until the seas were *down* and we were in atmosphere, approaching the twilight terminator in a gentle glide at three times the speed of our own sound.

We were gods then. But even gods must descend from their high thrones upon occasion.

Siri's body never ceased to amaze me. That time on the Archipelago. Three weeks in that huge, swaying treehouse under the billowing treesails with the dolphin herders keeping pace like outriders, tropical sunsets filling the evening with wonder, the canopy of stars at night, and our own wake marked by a thousand phosphorescent swirls that mirrored the constellations above. And still it is Siri's body I remember. For some reason—shyness, the years of separation—she wore two strips of swimsuit for the first few days of our Archipelago stay and the soft white of her breasts and lower belly had not darkened to match the rest of her tan before I had to leave again.

I remember her that first time. Triangles in the moonlight as we lay in the soft grass above Firstsite Harbor. Her silk pants catching on a weave of willowgrass. There was a child's modesty then; the slight hesitation of something given prematurely. But also pride. The same pride that later allowed her to face down the angry mob of Separatists on the steps of the Hegemony Consulate in South Tern and send them to their homes in shame.

I remember my fifth planetfall, our Fourth Reunion. It was one of the few times I ever saw her cry. She was almost regal in her fame and wisdom by then. She had been elected four times to the All Thing and the Hegemony Council turned to her for advice and guidance. She wore her independence like a royal cloak and her fierce pride had never burned more brightly. But when we were alone in the stone villa south of Fevarone, it was she who turned away. I was nervous, frightened by this powerful stranger, but it was Siri—Siri of the straight back and proud eyes, who turned her face to the wall and said through tears, “Go away. Go away, Merin. I don’t want you to see me. I’m a crone, all slack and sagging. Go away.”

I confess that I was rough with her then. I pinned her wrists with my left hand—using a strength which surprised even me—and tore her silken robe down the front in one move. I kissed her shoulders, her neck, the faded shadows of stretchmarks on her taut belly, and the scar on her upper leg from the skimmer crash some forty of her years earlier. I kissed her greying hair and the lines etched in the once-smooth cheeks. I kissed her tears.

“Jesus, Mike, this can’t be legal,” I’d said when my friend unrolled the hawking mat from his backpack. We were on Island 241, as the Hegemony traders had so romantically named the desolate volcanic blemish which they had chosen for our R-and-R site. Island 241 was less than 50 kilometers from the oldest of the colonial settlements, but it might as well have been 50 light years away. No native ships were to put in at the island while *Los Angeles* crewmen or farcaster workmen were present.

The Maui-Covenant colonists had a few ancient skimmers still in working order, but by mutual agreement there would be no overflights. Except for the dormitories, swimming beach, and the duty-free store, there was little on the island to interest us Shipmen. Some day, when the last components had been brought in-system by the *Los Angeles* and the farcaster finished, Hegemony officials would make Island 241 into a center for trade and tourism. Until then it was a primitive place with a dropship grid, newly finished buildings of the local white stone, and a few bored maintenance people. Mike checked the two of us out for three days of backpacking on the steepest and most inaccessible end of the little island.

“I don’t want to go backpacking, for Chrissake,” I’d said. “I’d rather stay on the *L.A.* and plug into a stimsim.”

“Shut up and follow me,” said Mike, and like a lesser member of the pantheon following an older and wiser deity, I had shut up and followed. Two hours of heavy tramping up the slopes through sharp-branched scrub-trees brought us to a lip of lava several hundred meters above the crashing surf. We were near the equator on a mostly tropical world, but on this exposed ledge the wind was howling and my teeth were chattering. The sunset was a red smear between dark cumulus to the west and I had no wish to be out in the open when full night descended.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get out of the wind and build a fire. I don’t know how the hell we’re going to set up a tent on all of this rock.”

Mike sat down and lit a cannabis stick. “Take a look in your pack, kid.”

I hesitated. His voice had been neutral but it was the flat neutrality of the practical joker’s voice just before the bucket of water descends. I crouched down and began pawing through the nylon sack. The pack was empty except for old flowfoam packing cubes to fill it out. Those and a harlequin’s costume complete with mask and bells on the toes.

“Are you … is this … are you goddamn *crazy*?” I spluttered. It was getting dark quickly now. The storm might or might not pass to the south of us. The surf was rasping below like a hungry beast. If I had known how to find my own way back to the trade compound in the dark, I might have considered leaving Mike Osho’s remains to feed the fishes far below.

“Now look at what’s in my pack,” he said. Mike dumped out some flowfoam cubes and then removed some jewelry of the type I’d seen hand-crafted on Renaissance, an inertial compass, a laser pen which might or might not be labelled a concealed weapon by Ship Security, another harlequin costume—this one tailored to his more rotund form—and a hawking mat.

“Jesus, Mike,” I said while running my hand over the exquisite design of the old carpet, “this can’t be legal.”

“I didn’t notice any customs agents back there,” grinned Mike. “And I

seriously doubt that the locals have any traffic control ordinances.”

“Yes, but …” I trailed off and unrolled the rest of the mat. It was a little more than a meter wide and about two meters long. The rich fabric had faded with age but the flight threads were still as bright as new copper. “Where did you get it?” I asked. “Does it still work?”

“On Garden,” said Mike and stuffed my costume and his other gear into his backpack. “Yes, it does.”

It had been more than a century since old Vladimir Sholokov, Old Earth emigrant, master lepidopterist, and E-M systems engineer, had hand-crafted the first hawking mat for his beautiful young niece on Nova Terra. Legend had it that the niece had scorned the gift but over the decades the toys had become almost absurdly popular—more with rich adults than with children—until they were outlawed on most Hegemony worlds. Dangerous to handle, a waste of shielded monofilaments, almost impossible to deal with in controlled airspace, hawking mats had become curiosities reserved for bedtime stories, museums, and a few colony worlds.

“It must have cost you a fortune,” I said.

“Thirty marks,” said Mike and settled himself on the center of the carpet. “The old dealer in Carnal Marketplace thought it was worthless. It was … for him. I brought it back to the ship, charged it up, reprogrammed the inertia chips, and *viola!*” Mike palmed the intricate design and the mat stiffened and rose fifteen centimeters above the rock ledge.

I stared doubtfully. “All right,” I said, “but what if it …”

“It won’t,” said Mike and impatiently patted the carpet behind him. “It’s fully charged. I know how to handle it. Come on, climb on or stand back. I want to get going before that storm gets any closer.”

“But I don’t think …”

“Come on, Merin. Make up your mind. I’m in a hurry.”

I hesitated for another second or two. If we were caught leaving the island, we would both be kicked off the ship. Shipwork was my life now. I had made that decision when I accepted the eight-mission Maui-Covenant contract. More than that, I was two hundred light years and five and a half leap years from civilization. Even if they brought us back to Hegemony-space, the round trip would have cost us eleven years worth of friends and family. The time-debt was irrevocable.

I crawled on the hovering hawking mat behind Mike. He stuffed the backpack between us, told me to hang on, and tapped at the flight designs. The mat rose five meters above the ledge, banked quickly to the left, and shot out over the alien ocean. Three hundred meters below us, the surf crashed whitely in the deepening gloom. We rose higher above the rough water and headed north into the night.

In such seconds of decision entire futures are made.

I remember talking to Siri during our Second Reunion, shortly after we first visited the villa along the coast near Fevarone. We were walking along the beach. Alón had been allowed to stay in the city under Magritte's supervision. It was just as well. I was not truly comfortable with the boy. Only the undeniable green solemnity of his eyes and the disturbing mirror-familiarity of his short, dark curls and snub of a nose served to tie him to me ... to us ... in my mind. That and the quick, almost sardonic smile I would catch him hiding from Siri when she reprimanded him. It was a smile too cynically amused and self-observant to be so practiced in a ten-year-old. I knew it well. I would have thought such things were learned, not inherited.

"You know very little," Siri said to me. She was wading, shoeless, in a shallow tidepool. From time to time she would lift the delicate shell of a frenchhorn-conch, inspect it for flaws, and drop it back into the silty water.

"I've been well-trained," I replied.

"Yes, I'm sure you've been well-trained," agreed Siri. "I know you are quite skillful, Merin. But you *know* very little."

Irritated, unsure of how to respond, I walked along with my head lowered. I dug a white lavastone out of the sand and tossed it far out into the bay. Rainclouds were piling along the eastern horizon. I found myself wishing that I was back aboard the ship. I had been reluctant to return this time and now I knew that it had been a mistake. It was my third visit to Maui-Covenant, our Second Reunion as the poets and her people were calling it. I was five months away from being 21 standard years old. Siri had just celebrated her thirty-seventh birthday three weeks earlier.

"I've been to a lot of places you've never seen," I said at last. It sounded petulant and childish even to me.

"Oh, yes," said Siri and clapped her hands together. For a second, in her enthusiasm, I glimpsed my other Siri—the young girl I had dreamed about during the long nine months of turn-around. Then the image slid back to harsh reality and I was all too aware of her short hair, the loosening neck muscles, and the cords appearing on the backs of those once beloved hands. "You've been to places I'll *never* see," said Siri in a rush. Her voice was the same. Almost the same. "Merin, my love, you've already seen things I cannot even imagine. You probably know more facts about the universe than I would guess exist. But you *know* very little, my darling."

"What the hell are you talking about, Siri?" I sat down on a half-submerged log near the strip of wet sand and drew my knees up like a fence between us.

Siri strode out of the tidepool and came to kneel in front of me. She took my hands in hers and although mine were bigger, heavier, blunter of finger and bone, I could feel the *strength* in hers. I imagined it as the strength of years I had not shared. “You have to live to really know things, my love. Having Alón has helped me to understand that. There is something about raising a child that helps to sharpen one’s sense of what is real.”

“How do you mean?”

Siri squinted away from me for a few seconds and absently brushed back a strand of hair. Her left hand stayed firmly around both of mine. “I’m not sure,” she said softly. “I think one begins to feel when things aren’t *important*. I’m not sure how to put it. When you’ve spent thirty years entering rooms filled with strangers you feel less pressure than when you’ve had only half that number of years of experience. You know what the room and the people in it probably hold for you and you go looking for it. If it’s not there, you sense it earlier and leave to go about your business. You just *know* more about what is, what isn’t, and how little time there is to learn the difference. Do you understand, Merin? Do you follow me even a little bit?”

“No,” I said.

Siri nodded and bit her lower lip. But she did not speak again for a while. Instead, she leaned over and kissed me. Her lips were dry and a little questioning. I held back for a second, seeing the sky beyond her, wanting time to think. But then I felt the warm intrusion of her tongue and closed my eyes. The tide was coming in behind us. I felt a sympathetic warmth and rising as Siri unbuttoned my shirt and ran sharp fingernails across my chest. There was a second of emptiness between us and I opened my eyes in time to see her unfastening the last buttons on the front of her white dress. Her breasts were larger than I remembered, heavier, the nipples broader and darker. The chill air nipped at both of us until I pulled the fabric down her shoulders and brought our upper bodies together. We slid down along the log to the warm sand. I pressed her closer, all the while wondering how I possibly could have thought her the stronger one. Her skin tasted of salt.

Siri’s hands helped me. Her short hair pressed back against bleached wood, white cotton, and sand. My pulse outraced the surf.

“Do you understand, Merin?” she whispered to me seconds later as her warmth connected us.

“Yes,” I whispered back. But I did not.

Mike brought the hawking mat in from the east toward Firstsite. The flight had taken over an hour in the dark and I had spent most of the time huddling from the wind and waiting for the carpet to fold up and tumble

us both into the sea. We were still half an hour out when we saw the first of the motile isles. Racing before the storm, treesails billowing, the islands sailed up from their southern feeding grounds in seemingly endless procession. Many were lit brilliantly, festooned with colored lanterns and shifting veils of gossamer light.

"You sure this is the way?" I shouted.

"Yes," shouted Mike. He did not turn his head. The wind whipped his long, black hair back against my face. From time to time he would check his compass and make small corrections to our course. It might have been easier to follow the isles. We passed one—a large one almost half a kilometer in length—and I strained to make out details, but the isle was dark except for the glow of its phosphorescent wake. Dark shapes cut through the milky waves. I tapped Mike on the shoulder and pointed.

"Dolphins!" he shouted. "That's what this colony was all about, remember? A bunch of do-gooders during the Hegira wanted to save all the mammals in Old Earth's oceans. Didn't succeed."

I would have shouted another question but at that moment the headland and Firstsite Harbor came into view.

I had thought the stars were bright above Maui-Covenant. I had thought the migrating islands were memorable in their colorful display. But the city of Firstsite, wrapped about with harbor and hills, was a blazing beacon in the night. Its brilliance reminded me of a torchship I once had watched while it created its own plasma nova against the dark limb of a sullen gas giant. The city was a five-tiered honeycomb of white buildings, all illuminated by warmly glowing lanterns from within and by countless torches from without. The white lavastone of the volcanic island itself seemed to glow from the city light. Beyond the town were tents, pavilions, campfires, cooking fires, and great flaming pyres, too large for function, too large for anything except to serve as a welcome to the returning isles.

The harbor was filled with boats: bobbing catamarans with cowbells clanking from their masts; large-hulled, flat-bottomed houseboats built for creeping from port to port in the calm, equatorial shallows but proudly ablaze with strings of lights this night; and then the occasional oceangoing yacht, sleek and functional as a shark. A lighthouse set out on the pincer's end of the harbor reef threw its beam far out to sea, illuminated wave and isle alike, and then swept its light back in to catch the colorful bobbing of ships and men.

Even from two kilometers out we could hear the noise. Sounds of celebration were clearly audible. Above the shouts and constant susurration of the surf rose the unmistakable notes of a Bach flute sonata. I learned later that this welcoming chorus was transmitted through hydrophones to the Passage Channels where dolphins leapt and cavorted

to the music.

"My God, Mike, how did you know all of this was going on?"

"I asked the main ship computer," said Mike. The hawking mat banked right to keep us far out from the ships and lighthouse beam. Then we curved back in north of Firstsite toward a dark spit of land. I could hear the soft booming of waves on the shallows ahead. "They have this festival every year," Mike went on, "but this is their sesquicentennial. The party's been going on for three weeks now and is scheduled to continue another two. There are only about 100,000 colonists on this whole world, Merin, and I bet half of them are here partying."

We slowed, came in carefully, and touched down on a rocky outcropping not far from the beach. The storm had missed us to the south but intermittent flashes of lightning and the distant lights of advancing isles still marked the horizon. Overhead, the stars were not dimmed by the glow from Firstsite just over the rise from us. The air was warmer here and I caught the scent of orchards on the breeze. We folded up the hawking mat and hurried to get into our harlequin costumes. Mike slipped his laser pen and jewelry into loose pockets.

"What are those for?" I asked as we secured the backpack and hawking mat under a large boulder.

"These?" asked Mike as he dangled a Renaissance necklace from his fingers. "These are currency in case we have to negotiate for favors."

"Favors?"

"Favors," repeated Mike. "A lady's *largesse*. Comfort to a weary space-farer. Nooky to you, kid."

"Oh," I said and adjusted my mask and fool's cap. The bells made a soft sound in the dark.

"Come on," said Mike. "We'll miss the party." I nodded and followed him, bells jangling, as we picked our way over stone and scrub toward the waiting light.

I sit here in the sunlight and wait. I am not totally certain what I am waiting for. I can feel a growing warmth on my back as the morning sunlight is reflected from the white stone of Siri's tomb.

*Siri's tomb?*

There are no clouds in the sky. I raise my head and squint skyward as if I might be able to see the L.A. and the newly finished farcaster array through the glare of atmosphere. I cannot. Part of me knows that they have not risen yet. Part of me knows to the second the time remaining before ship and farcaster complete their transit to the zenith. Part of me does not want to think about it.

*Siri, am I doing the right thing?*

There is the sudden sound of pennants stirring on their staffs as the

wind comes up. I sense rather than see the restlessness of the waiting crowd. For the first time since my planetfall for this, our Sixth Reunion, I am filled with sorrow. No, not sorrow, not yet, but a sharptoothed sadness which soon will open into grief. For years I have carried on silent conversations with Siri, framing questions to myself for future discussion with her, and it suddenly strikes me with cold clarity that we will never again sit together and talk. An emptiness begins to grow inside me.

*Should I let it happen, Siri?*

There is no response except for the growing murmurs of the crowd. In a few minutes they will send Donel, my younger and surviving son, or his daughter Lira up the hill to urge me on. I toss away the sprig of willowgrass I've been chewing on. There is a hint of shadow on the horizon. It could be a cloud. Or it could be the first of the isles, driven by instinct and the spring northerlies to migrate back to the great band of the equatorial shallows from whence they came. It does not matter.

*Siri, am I doing the right thing?*

There is no answer and the time grows shorter.

• • •

Sometimes Siri seemed so ignorant it made me sick.

She knew nothing of my life away from her. She would ask questions but I sometimes wondered if she was interested in the answers. I spent many hours explaining the beautiful physics behind our C-plus spinships but she never did seem to understand. Once, after I had taken great care to detail the differences between their ancient seedship and the *Los Angeles*, Siri astounded me by asking, "But why did it take my ancestors 80 years of shiptime to reach Maui-Covenant when you can make the trip in 130 days?" She had understood nothing.

Siri's sense of history was, at best, pitiful. She viewed the Hegemony and the worldweb the way a child would view the fantasy world of a pleasant but rather silly myth; there was an indifference there that almost drove me mad at times.

Siri knew all about the early days of the Hegira—at least insofar as they pertained to the Maui-Covenant and the colonists—and she occasionally would come up with delightful bits of archaic trivia or phraseology, but she knew nothing of post-Hegira realities. Names like Garden and Ouster, Renaissance and Lusus meant little to her. I could mention Salmen Brey or General Horace Glennon-Hight and she would have no associations or reactions at all. None.

The last time I saw Siri she was 70 standard years old. She was *70 years old* and still she had never: traveled offworld, used a comlog, tasted any alcoholic drink except wine; interfaced with an empathy surgeon,

stepped through a farcaster door, smoked a cannabis stick, received gene tailoring, plugged into a stimsim, received any formal schooling, taken any RNA medication, heard of Zen Christianity, or flown any vehicle except an ancient Vikken skimmer belonging to her family.

Siri had never made love to anyone except me. Or so she said. And so I believed.

It was during our First Reunion, that time on the Archipelago, when Siri took me to talk with the dolphins.

We had risen to watch the dawn. The highest levels of the treehouse were a perfect place from which to watch the eastern sky pale and fade to morning. Ripples of high cirrus turned to rose and then the sea itself grew molten as the sun lifted above the flat horizon.

“Let’s go swimming,” said Siri. The rich, horizontal light bathed her skin and threw her shadow four meters across the boards of the platform.

“I’m too tired,” I said. “Later.” We had lain awake most of the night talking, making love, talking, and making love again. In the glare of morning I felt empty and vaguely nauseated. I sensed the slight movement of the isle under me as a tinge of vertigo, a drunkard’s disconnection from gravity.

“No. Let’s go now,” said Siri and grasped my hand to pull me along. I was irritated but did not argue. Siri was 26, seven years older than me during that First Reunion, but her impulsive behavior often reminded me of the teen-aged Siri I had carried away from the Festival only ten of my months earlier. Her deep, unselfconscious laugh was the same. Her green eyes cut as sharply when she was impatient. The long mane of auburn hair had not changed. But her body had ripened, filled out with a promise which had been only hinted at before. Her breasts were still high and full, almost girlish, bordered above by freckles that gave way to a whiteness so translucent that a gentle blue tracery of veins could be seen. But they were *different* somehow. She was different.

“Are you going to join me or just sit there staring?” asked Siri. She had slipped off her caftan as we came out onto the lowest deck. Our small ship was still tied to the dock. Above us, the island’s treesails were beginning to open to the morning breeze. For the past several days, Siri had insisted on wearing swimstrips when we went into the water. She wore none now. Her nipples rose in the cool air.

“Won’t we be left behind?” I asked, squinting up at the flapping treesails. On previous days we had waited for the doldrums in the middle of the day when the isle was still in the water, the sea a glazed mirror. Now the jibvines were beginning to pull taut as the thick leaves filled with wind.

“Don’t be silly,” said Siri. “We could always catch a keelroot and

follow it back. That or a feeding tendril. Come on.” She tossed an osmosis mask at me and donned her own. The transparent film made her face look slick with oil. From the pocket of her caftan she lifted a thick medallion and set it in place around her neck. The metal looked dark and ominous against her skin.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

Siri did not lift the osmosis mask to answer. She set the comthreads in place against her neck and handed me the hearplugs. Her voice was tinny. “Translation disk,” she said. “Thought you knew all about gadgets, Merin. Last one in’s a seaslug.” She held the disk in place between her breasts with one hand and stepped off the isle. I could see the pale globes of her buttocks as she pirouetted and kicked for depth. In seconds she was only a white blur deep in the water. I slipped my own mask on, pressed the comthreads tight, and stepped into the sea.

The bottom of the isle was a dark stain on a ceiling of crystalline light. I was wary of the thick feeding tendrils even though Siri had amply demonstrated that they were interested in devouring nothing larger than the tiny zoo-plankton that even now caught the sunlight like dust in an abandoned ballroom. Keelroots descended like gnarled stalactites for hundreds of meters into the purple depths.

The isle was moving. I could see the faint fibrillation of the tendrils as they trailed along. A wake caught the light ten meters above me. For a second I was choking, the gel of the mask smothering me as surely as the surrounding water would, and then I relaxed and the air flowed freely into my lungs.

“Deeper, Merin,” came Siri’s voice. I blinked—a slow motion blink as the mask readjusted itself over my eyes—and caught sight of Siri twenty meters lower, grasping a keelroot and trailing effortlessly above the colder, deeper currents where the light did not reach. I thought of the thousands of meters of water under me, of the things which might lurk there, unknown, unsought-out by the human colonists. I thought of the dark and the depths and my scrotum tightened involuntarily.

“Come on down.” Siri’s voice was an insect buzz in my ears. I rotated and kicked. The buoyancy here was not so great as in Old Earth’s seas, but it still took energy to dive so deep. The mask compensated for depth and nitrogen but I could feel the pressure against my skin and ears. Finally I quit kicking, grabbed a keelroot, and roughly hauled myself down to Siri’s level.

We floated side by side in the dim light. Siri was a spectral figure here, her long hair swirling in a wine-dark nimbus, the pale strips of her body glowing in the blue-green light. The surface seemed impossibly distant. The widening V of the wake and the drift of the scores of tendrils showed that the isle was moving more quickly now, moving mindlessly to other

feeding grounds, distant waters.

“Where are the ...” I began to subvocalize.

“Shhh,” said Siri. She fiddled with the medallion. I could hear them then; the shrieks and trills and whistles and cat purrs and echoing cries. The depths were suddenly filled with strange music.

“Jesus,” I said and because Siri had tuned our comthreads to the translator, the word was broadcast as a senseless whistle and toot.

“Hello!” she called and the translated greeting echoed from the transmitter; a high-speed bird’s call sliding into the ultrasonic. “Hello!” she called again.

Minutes passed before the dolphins came to investigate. They rolled past us, surprisingly large, alarmingly large, their skin looking slick and muscled in the uncertain light. A large one swam within a meter of us, turning at the last moment so that the white of his belly curved past us like a wall. I could see the dark eye rotate to follow me as he passed. One stroke of his wide fluke kicked up a turbulence strong enough to convince me of the animal’s power.

“Hello,” called Siri but the swift form faded into distant haze and there was a sudden silence. Siri clicked off the translator. “Do you want to talk to them?” she asked.

“Sure.” I was dubious. More than three centuries of effort had not raised much of a dialogue between man and sea-mammal. Mike had once told me that the thought structures of Old Earth’s two groups of orphans were too different, the referents too few. One pre-Hegira expert had written that speaking to a dolphin or porpoise was about as rewarding as speaking to a one-year-old human infant. Both sides usually enjoyed the exchange and there was a simulacrum of conversation, but neither party would come away the more knowledgeable. Siri switched the translator disk back on. “Hello,” I said.

There was a final minute of silence and then our earphones were buzzing while the sea echoed shrill ululations.

*distance/no-fluke/hello-tone?/current pulse/circle me/funny?*

“What the hell?” I asked Siri and the translator trilled out my question. Siri was grinning under her osmosis mask.

I tried again. “Hello! Greetings from ... uh ... the surface. How are you?”

The large male ... I assumed it to be a male ... curved in toward us like a torpedo. He arch-kicked his way through the water ten times faster than I could have swum even if I had remembered to don flippers that morning. For a second I thought he was going to ram us and I raised my knees and clung tightly to the keelroot. Then he was past us, climbing for air, while Siri and I reeled from his turbulent wake and the high tones of his shout.

*no-fluke/no-feed/no-swim/no-play/no-fun.*

Siri switched off the translator and floated closer. She lightly grasped my shoulders while I held onto the keelroot with my right hand. Our legs touched as we drifted through the warm water. A school of tiny, crimson warriorfish flickered above us while the dark shapes of the dolphins circled further out.

“Had enough?” she asked. Her hand was flat on my chest.

“One more try,” I said. Siri nodded and twisted the disk to life. The current pushed us together again. She slid her arm around me.

“Why do you herd the islands?” I asked the bottle-nosed shapes circling in the dappled light. “How does it benefit you to stay with the isles?”

*sounding now/old songs/deep water/no-Great Voices/no-Shark/old songs/new songs.*

Siri’s body lay along the length of me now. Her left arm tightened around me. “Great Voices were the whales,” she whispered. Her hair fanned out in streamers. Her right hand moved down and seemed surprised at what it found.

“Do you miss the Great Voices?” I asked the shadows. There was no response. Siri slid her legs around my hips. The surface was a churning bowl of light forty meters above us.

“What do you miss most of Old Earth’s oceans?” I asked. With my left arm I pulled Siri closer, slid my hand down along the curve of her back to where her buttocks rose to meet my palm, and held her tight. To the circling dolphins we must have appeared a single creature. Siri lifted herself against me and we became a single creature.

The translator disk had twisted around so it trailed over Siri’s shoulder. I reached to shut it off but paused as the answer to my question buzzed urgently in our ears.

*miss Shark/miss Shark/miss Shark/miss Shark/Shark/Shark/Shark*

I turned off the disk and shook my head. I did not understand. There was so much I did not understand. I closed my eyes as Siri and I moved gently to the rhythms of the current and ourselves while the dolphins swam nearby and the cadence of their calls took on the sad, slow trilling of an old lament.

I sit here in the sunlight and wait. Now that I have made my decision, I wonder if it is what Siri wanted all along.

The tomb is a white glare behind me. The sunlight touches my skin. I can hear a low murmur from the restless crowd on the hillside. Several of the council members are conferring with Donel. Soon he will climb the slope to urge me on. The farcaster ceremonies cannot wait for me.

*Is this what you wanted, Siri?”*

I desperately want to talk to her now. I want to ask her who it was who so deftly crafted and shaped the legend that was our love.

*Was it you, Siri?* Could a not-quite sixteen-year-old have planned so far ahead?

Surf breaks against the lavastone seawall. I can hear the bells ringing as the small boats bob at anchorage. I sit in the sunlight and wait.

*Where were you when I awoke that first time, Siri?*

Somewhere to the south a Thomas Hawk screams. There is no other answer.

Siri and I came down out of the hills and returned to the Festival just before sunrise of the second day. For a night and a day we had roamed the hills, eaten with strangers in pavilions of orange silk, bathed together in the icy waters of the Shree, and danced to the music which never ceased going out to the endless file of passing isles. We were hungry. I had awakened at sunset to find Siri gone. She returned before the moon of Maui-Covenant rose. She told me that her parents had gone off with friends for several days on a slow-moving houseboat. They had left the family skimmer in Firstsite. Now we worked our way from dance to dance, bonfire to bonfire, back to the center of the city. We planned to fly west to her family estate near Fevarone.

It was very late but Firstsite Common still had its share of revelers. I was very happy. I was nineteen and I was in love and the .93 gravity of Maui-Covenant seemed much less to me. I could have flown had I wished. I could have done anything.

We had stopped at a booth and bought fried dough and mugs of black coffee. Suddenly a thought struck me. I asked, "How did you know I was a Shipman?"

"Hush, friend Merin. Eat your poor breakfast. When we get to the villa, I will fix a true meal to break our fast."

"No, I'm serious," I said and wiped grease off my chin with the sleeve of my less-than-clean harlequin's costume. "This morning you said that you knew right away last night that I was from the ship. Why was that? Was it my accent? My costume? Mike and I saw other fellows dressed like this."

Siri laughed and brushed back her hair. "Just be glad it was I who spied you out, Merin my love. Had it been my Uncle Gresham or his friends it would have meant trouble."

"Oh? Why is that?" I picked up one more fried ring and Siri paid for it. I followed her through the thinning crowd. Despite the motion and the music all about, I felt weariness beginning to work on me.

"They are Separatists," said Siri. "Uncle Gresham recently gave a speech before the All Thing urging that we fight rather than agree to be

swallowed into your Hegemony. He said that we should destroy your farcaster device before it destroys us.”

“Oh?” I said. “Did he say how he was going to do that? The last I heard you folks had no craft to get offworld in.”

“Nay, nor for the past fifty years have we,” said Siri. “But it shows how irrational the Separatists can be.”

I nodded. Shipmaster Singh and Councillor Halmyn had briefed us on the so-called Separatists of Maui-Covenant. “The usual coalition of colonial jingoists and throwbacks,” Singh had said. “Another reason we go slowly and develop the world’s trade potential before finishing the farcaster. The worldweb doesn’t need these yahoos coming in prematurely. And groups like the Separatists are another reason to keep you crew and construction workers the hell away from the groundlings.”

“Where is your skimmer?” I asked. The Common was emptying quickly. Most of the bands had packed up their instruments for the night. Gaily costumed heaps lay snoring on the grass or cobblestones amid the litter and unlit lanterns. Only a few enclaves of merriment remained, groups dancing slowly to a lone guitar or singing drunkenly to themselves. I saw Mike Osho at once, a patch-worked fool, his mask long gone, a girl on either arm. He was trying to teach the hora to a rapt but inept circle of admirers. One of the troupe would stumble and they would all fall down. Mike would flog them to their feet among general laughter and they would start again, hopping clumsily to his basso-profundo chant.

“There it is,” said Siri and pointed to a short line of skimmers parked behind the Common Hall. I nodded and waved to Mike but he was too busy hanging on to his two ladies to notice me. Siri and I had crossed the square and were in the shadows of the old building when the shout went up.

“Shipman! Turn around, you Hegemony son-of-a-bitch.”

I froze and then wheeled around with fists clenched but no one was near me. Six young men had descended the steps from the grandstand and were standing in a semicircle behind Mike. The man in front was tall, slim, and strikingly handsome. He was twenty-five or twenty-six years old and his long blonde curls spilled down on a crimson silk suit that emphasized his physique. In his right hand he carried a meter-long sword that looked to be of tempered steel.

Mike turned slowly. Even from a distance I could see his eyes sobering as he surveyed the situation. The women at his side and a couple of the young men in his group tittered as if something humorous had been said. Mike allowed the inebriated grin to stay on his face. “You address me, sir?” he asked.

“I address you, you Hegemony whore’s son,” hissed the leader of the group. His handsome face was twisted into a sneer.

"Bertol," whispered Siri. "My cousin. Gresham's younger son." I nodded and stepped out of the shadows. Siri caught my arm.

"That is twice you have referred unkindly to my mother, sir," slurred Mike. "Have she or I offended you in some way? If so, a thousand pardons." Mike bowed so deeply that the bells on his cap almost brushed the ground. Members of his group applauded.

"Your presence offends me, you Hegemony bastard. You stink up our air with your fat carcass."

Mike's eyebrows rose comically. A young man near him in a fish costume waved his hand. "Oh, come on, Bertol. He's just ..."

"Shut up, Ferick. It is this fat shithead I am speaking to."

"Shithead?" repeated Mike, eyebrows still raised. "I've traveled two hundred light years to be called a fat shithead? It hardly seems worth it." He pivoted gracefully, untangling himself from the women as he did so. I would have joined Mike then but Siri clung tightly to my arm, whispering unheard entreaties. When I was free I saw that Mike was still smiling, still playing the fool. But his left hand was in his baggy shirt pocket.

"Give him your blade, Creg," snapped Bertol. One of the younger men tossed a sword hilt-first to Mike. Mike watched it arc by and clang loudly on the cobblestones.

"You can't be serious," said Mike in a soft voice that was suddenly quite sober. "You cretinous cowturd. Do you really think I'm going to play duel with you just because you get a hard-on acting the hero for these yokels?"

"Pick up the sword," screamed Bertol, "or by God I'll carve you where you stand." He took a quick step forward. The youth's face contorted with fury as he advanced.

"Fuck off," said Mike. In his left hand was the laser pen.

"No!" I yelled and ran into the light. That pen was used by construction workers to scrawl marks on girders of whiskered alloy.

Things happened very quickly then. Bertol took another step and Mike flicked the green beam across him almost casually. The colonist let out a cry and leaped back; a smoking line of black was slashed diagonally across his silk shirtfront. I hesitated. Mike had the setting as low as it could go. Two of Bertol's friends started forward and Mike swung the light across their shins. One dropped to his knees cursing and the other hopped away holding his leg and hooting.

A crowd had gathered. They laughed as Mike swept off his fool's cap in another bow. "I thank you," said Mike. "My mother thanks you."

Siri's cousin strained against his rage. Froths of spittle spilled on his lips and chin. I pushed through the crowd and stepped between Mike and the tall colonist.

"Hey, it's all right," I said. "We're leaving. We're going now."

"Goddamn it, Merin, get out of the way," said Mike.

"It's all right," I said as I turned to him. "I'm with a girl named Siri who has a ..." Bertol stepped forward and lunged past me with his blade. I wrapped my left arm around his shoulder and flung him back. He tumbled heavily onto the grass.

"Oh, shit," said Mike as he backed up several paces. He looked tired and a little disgusted as he sat down on a stone step. "Aw, *damn*," he said softly. There was a short line of crimson in one of the black patches on the left side of his harlequin costume. As I watched, the narrow slit spilled over and blood ran down across Mike Osho's broad belly.

"Oh, Jesus, Mike." I tore a strip of fabric from my shirt and tried to staunch the flow. I could remember none of the first-aid we'd been taught as midshipmen. I pawed at my wrist but my comlog was not there. We had left them on the *Los Angeles*.

"It's not so bad, Mike," I gasped. "It's just a little cut." The blood flowed down over my hand and wrist.

"It will serve," said Mike. His voice was held taut by a cord of pain. "Damn. A fucking sword. Do you believe it, Merin? Cut down in the prime of my prime by a piece of fucking cutlery out of a fucking one-penny opera. Oh, *damn* that smarts."

"Three-penny opera," I said and changed hands. The rag was soaked.

"You know what your fucking problem is, Merin? You're always sticking your fucking two cents in. Awwwww." Mike's face went white and then gray. He lowered his chin to his chest and breathed deeply. "To hell with this, kid. Let's go home, huh?"

I looked over my shoulder. Bertol was slowly moving away with his friends. The rest of the crowd milled around in shock. "Call a doctor!" I screamed. "Get some medics up here!" Two men ran down the street. There was no sign of Siri.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" said Mike in a stronger voice, as if he had forgotten something important. "Just a minute," he said and died.

Died. A real death. Brain death. His mouth opened obscenely, his eyes rolled back so only the whites showed, and a minute later the blood ceased pumping from the wound.

For a few mad seconds I cursed the sky. I could see the *L.A.* moving across the fading starfield and I knew that I could bring Mike back if I could get him there in a few minutes. The crowd backed away as I screamed and ranted at the stars.

Eventually I turned to Bertol. "You," I said.

The young man had stopped at the far end of the Common. His face was ashen. He stared wordlessly.

"You," I said again. I picked up the laser pen from where it had rolled,

clicked the power to maximum, and walked to where Bertol and his friends stood waiting.

Later, through the haze of screams and scorched flesh, I was dimly aware of Siri's skimmer setting down in the crowded square, of dust flying up all around, and of her voice commanding me to join her. We lifted away from the light and madness. The cool wind blew my sweat-soaked hair away from my neck.

"We will go to Fevarone," said Siri. "Bertol was drunk. The Separatists are a small, violent group. There will be no reprisals. You will stay with me until the All Thing holds the inquest."

"No," I said. "There. Land there." I pointed to a spit of land not far from the city.

Siri landed despite her protests. I glanced at the boulder to make sure the backpack was still there and then climbed out of the skimmer. Siri slid across the seat and pulled my head down to hers. "Merin, my love." Her lips were warm and open but I felt nothing. My body felt anaesthetized. I stepped back and waved her away. She brushed her hair back and stared at me from green eyes filled with tears. Then the skimmer lifted, turned, and sped to the south in the early morning light.

*Just a minute,* I felt like calling. I sat on a rock and gripped my knees as several ragged sobs were torn up out of me. Then I stood and threw the laser pen into the surf below. I tugged out the backpack and dumped the contents on the ground.

The hawking mat was gone.

I sat back down, too drained to laugh or cry or walk away. The sun rose as I sat there. I was still sitting there three hours later when the large, black skimmer from Ship Security set down silently beside me.

• • •

"Father? Father, it is getting late."

I turn to see my son Donel standing behind me. He is wearing the blue and gold robe of the Hegemony Council. His bald scalp is flushed and beaded with sweat. Donel is only 43 but he seems much older to me.

"Please, Father," he says. I nod and rise, brushing off the grass and dirt. We walk together to the front of the tomb. The crowd has pressed closer now. Gravel crunches under their feet as they shift restlessly. "Shall I enter with you, Father?" Donel asks.

I pause to look at this aging stranger who is my child. There is a little of Siri or me reflected in him. His face is friendly, florid, and tense with the excitement of the day. I can sense in him the open honesty which often takes the place of intelligence in some people. I cannot help but compare this balding puppy of a man to Alón—Alón of the dark curls and silences

and sardonic smile. But Alón is 33 years dead, cut down in a stupid battle which had nothing to do with him.

"No," I say. "I'll go in by myself. Thank you, Donel."

He nods and steps back. The pennants snap above the heads of the straining crowd. I turn my attention to the tomb.

The entrance is sealed with a palmlock. I have only to touch it.

During the past few minutes I have developed a fantasy which will save me from both the growing sadness within and the external series of events which I have initiated. Siri is not dead. In the last stages of her illness she had called together the doctors and the few technicians left in the colony and they rebuilt for her one of the ancient hibernation chambers used in their seedship two centuries earlier. Siri is only sleeping. What is more, the year-long sleep has somehow restored her youth. When I wake her she will be the Siri I remember from our early days. We will walk out into the sunlight together and when the farcaster doors open we shall be the first through.

"Father?"

"Yes." I step forward and set my hand to the door of the crypt. There is a whisper of electric motors and the white slab of stone slides back. I bow my head and enter Siri's tomb.

"Damn it, Merin, secure that line before it knocks you overboard. Hurry!" I hurried. The wet rope was hard to coil, harder to tie off. Siri shook her head in disgust and leaned over to tie a bowline knot with one hand.

It was our Fifth Reunion. I had been three months too late for her birthday but more than five thousand other people had made it to the celebration. The President of the All Thing had wished her well in a forty-minute speech. A poet read his most recent verses to the Love Cycle Sonnets. The Hegemony Ambassador had presented her with a scroll and a new ship, a small submersible powered by the first fusion-cells to be allowed on Maui-Covenant.

Siri had eighteen other ships. Twelve belonged to her fleet of swift catamarans that plied their trade between the wandering Archipelago and the Home Islands. Two were beautiful racing yachts that were used only twice a year to win the Founder's Regatta and the Covenant Criterium. The other four craft were ancient fishing boats, homely and awkward, well-maintained but little more than scows.

Siri had nineteen ships but we were on a fishing boat—the *Ginnie Paul*. For the past eight days we had fished the shelf of the Equatorial Shallows; a crew of two, casting and pulling nets, wading knee-deep through stinking fish and crunching trilobites, wallowing over every wave, casting and pulling nets, keeping watch, and sleeping like exhausted children during our brief rest periods. I was not quite 23. I

thought I was used to heavy labor aboard the *L.A.* and it was my custom to put in an hour of exercise in the 1.3-gee pod every second shift, but now my arms and back ached from the strain and my hands were blistered between the callouses. Siri had just turned 70.

"Merin, go forward and reef the foresail. Do the same for the jib and then go below to see to the sandwiches. Plenty of mustard."

I nodded and went forward. For a day and a half we had been playing hide and seek with a storm; sailing before it when we could, turning about and accepting its punishment when we had to. At first it had been exciting, a welcome respite from the endless casting and pulling and mending. But after the first few hours the adrenaline rush faded to be replaced by constant nausea, fatigue, and a terrible tiredness. The seas did not relent. The waves grew to six meters and higher. The *Ginnie Paul* swallowed like the broad-beamed matron she was. Everything was wet. My skin was soaked under three layers of rain gear. For Siri it was a long-awaited vacation.

"This is nothing," she had said during the darkest hour of the night as waves washed over the deck and smashed against the scarred plastic of the cockpit. "You should see it during simoon season."

The clouds still hung low and blended into gray waves in the distance but the sea was down to a gentle five-foot chop. I spread mustard across the roast beef sandwiches and poured steaming coffee into thick, white mugs. It would have been easier to transport the coffee in zero-gee without spilling it than to get it up the pitching shaft of the companionway. Siri accepted her depleted cup without commenting. We sat in silence for a bit, appreciating the food and the tongue-scalding warmth of the coffee. I took the wheel when Siri went below to refill our mugs. The gray day was dimming almost imperceptibly into night.

"Merin," she said after handing me my mug and taking a seat on the long, cushioned bench which encircled the cockpit, "what will happen after they open the farcaster?"

I was surprised by the question. We rarely talked about the time when Maui-Covenant would join the Hegemony. I glanced over at Siri and was shocked by the countenance revealed by the harsh, upward glare of the instrument lights. Siri's face showed a hidden mosaic of seams and shadows which would soon replace the pale, translucent complexion of the woman I had known. Her beautiful, green eyes were hidden in wells of darkness and the cruel light turned her cheekbones into knife-edges against brittle parchment. Siri's gray hair was cut short and now it stuck out in damp spikes. I could see the tendoned cords under the loose skin of her neck and wrists. Age was laying claim to Siri.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What will happen after they open the farcaster?"

“You know what the Council says.” I spoke loudly, as if she were hard of hearing. “It will open a new era of trade and technology for Maui-Covenant. You won’t be restricted to one little world any longer. When you become citizens, everyone will be entitled to use the farcaster doors.”

“Yes,” said Siri. Her voice was weary. “I have heard all of that, Merin. But what will *happen*? Who will be the first through to us?”

I shrugged. “More diplomats, I suppose. Cultural contact specialists. Anthropologists. Ethnologists. Marine biologists.”

“And then?”

I paused. It was dark out. The sea was almost gentle. Our running lights glowed red and green against the night. I felt the same anxiety I had known two days earlier when the wall of storm appeared on the horizon. I said, “And then will come the missionaries. The petroleum geologists. The sea farmers. The developers.”

Siri sipped at her coffee. “I would have thought your Hegemony was far beyond a petroleum economy.”

I laughed and locked the wheel in. “Nobody gets beyond a petroleum economy. Not while the petroleum’s there. We don’t burn it, if that’s what you mean. But it’s still essential for the production of plastics, synthetics, food base, and keroids. Two hundred billion people use a lot of plastic.”

“And Maui-Covenant has oil?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. There was no more laughter in me. “There are billions of barrels reservoired under the Equatorial Shallows alone.”

“How will they get it, Merin? Platforms?”

“Yeah. Platforms. Submersibles. Sub-sea colonies with tailored workers brought in from Ouster or the Tau Ceti Cities.”

“And the motile isles?” asked Siri. “They must return each year to the shallows to feed on the bluekelp there and to reproduce. What will become of the isles?”

I shrugged again. I had drunk too much coffee and it left a bitter taste in my mouth. “I don’t know,” I said. “They haven’t told the crew much. But back on our first trip out, Mike heard that they planned to develop as many of the isles as they can, so some will be protected.”

“Developed?” Siri’s voice showed surprise for the first time. “How can they develop the isles? Even the Founder’s Families must ask permission of the Sea Folk to build our treehouse retreats there.”

I smiled at Siri’s use of the local term for the dolphins. The Maui-Covenant colonists were such children when it came to their damned dolphins. “The plans are all set,” I said. “There are 128,573 motile isles big enough to build a dwelling on. Leases to those have long since been sold. The smaller isles will be broken up, I suppose. The Home Islands will be developed for recreation purposes.”

“Recreation purposes,” echoed Siri. “How many people from the

Hegemony will use the farcaster to come here ... for recreation purposes?"

"At first, you mean?" I asked. "Just a few thousand the first year. As long as the only door is on Island 241 ... the Trade Center ... it will be limited. Perhaps 50,000 the second year when Firstsite gets its door. It'll be quite the luxury tour. Always is after a seed colony is first opened to the web."

"And later?"

"After the five-year probation? There will be thousands of doors, of course. I would imagine that there will be twenty or thirty million new residents coming through during the first year of full citizenship."

"Twenty or thirty million," said Siri. The light from the compass stand illuminated her lined face from below. There was still a beauty there. But there was no anger or shock. I had expected both.

"But you'll be citizens then yourself," I said. "Free to step anywhere in the worldweb. There will be sixteen new worlds to choose from. Probably more by then."

"Yes," said Siri and set aside her empty mug. A fine rain streaked the glass around us. The crude radar screen set in its hand-carved frame showed the seas empty, the storm past. "Is it true, Merin, that people in the Hegemony have their homes on a dozen worlds? One house, I mean, with windows facing out on a dozen skies?"

"Sure," I said. "But not many people. Only the rich can afford multi-world residences like that."

Siri smiled and set her hand on my knee. The back of her hand was mottled and blue-veined. "But you are very rich, are you not, Shipman?"

I looked away. "Not yet I'm not."

"Ah, but soon, Merin, soon. How long for you, my love? Less than two weeks here and then the voyage back to your Hegemony. Five months more of your time to bring the last components back, a few weeks to finish, and then you step home a rich man. *Step* two hundred empty light years home. What a strange thought ... but where was I? That is how long? Less than a standard year."

"Ten months," I said. "Three hundred and six standard days. Three hundred fourteen of yours. Nine hundred eighteen shifts."

"And then your exile will be over."

"Yes."

"And you will be twenty-four years old and very rich."

"Yes."

"I'm tired, Merin. I want to sleep now."

We programmed the tiller, set the collision alarm, and went below. The wind had risen some and the old vessel wallowed from wavecrest to trough with every swell. We undressed in the dim light of the swinging

lamp. I was first in the bunk and under the covers. It was the first time Siri and I had shared a sleep period. Remembering our last Reunion and her shyness at the villa, I expected her to douse the light. Instead she stood a minute, nude in the chill air, thin arms calmly at her sides.

Time had claimed Siri but had not ravaged her. Gravity had done its inevitable work on her breasts and buttocks and she was much thinner. I stared at the gaunt outlines of ribs and breastbone and remembered the sixteen-year-old girl with baby fat and skin like warm velvet. In the cold light of the swinging lamp I stared at Siri's sagging flesh and remembered moonlight on budding breasts. Yet somehow, strangely, inexplicably, it was the *same* Siri who stood before me now.

"Move over, Merin." She slipped into the bunk beside me. The sheets were cool against our skin, the rough blanket welcome. I turned off the light. The little ship swayed to the regular rhythm of the sea's breathing. I could hear the sympathetic creak of masts and rigging. In the morning we would be casting and pulling and mending but now there was time to sleep. I began to doze to the sound of waves against wood.

"Merin?"

"Yes?"

"What would happen if the Separatists attacked the Hegemony tourists or the new residents?"

"I thought the Separatists had all been carted off to the isles."

"They have been. But what if they resisted?"

"The Hegemony would send in troops who could kick the shit out of the Separatists."

"What if the farcaster itself were attacked ... destroyed before it was operational?"

"Impossible."

"Yes, I know, but what if it were?"

"Then the *Los Angeles* would return nine months later with Hegemony troops who would proceed to kick the shit out of the Separatists ... and anyone else on Maui-Covenant who got in their way."

"Nine months shiptime," said Siri. "Eleven years of our time."

"But inevitable either way," I said. "Let's talk about something else."

"All right," said Siri but we did not speak. I listened to the creak and sigh of the ship. Siri had nestled in the hollow of my arm. Her head was on my shoulder and her breathing was so deep and regular that I thought her to be asleep. I was almost asleep myself when her warm hand slid up my leg and lightly cupped me. I startled even as I began to stir and stiffen. Siri whispered an answer to my unasked question. "No, Merin, one is never really too old. At least not too old to want the warmth and closeness. You decide, my love. I will be content either way."

I decided. Towards the dawn we slept.

• • •

The tomb is empty.

*“Donel, come in here!”*

He hustled in, robes rustling in the hollow emptiness. The tomb is empty. There is no hibernation chamber—I did not truly expect there to be one—but neither is there sarcophagus nor coffin. A bright bulb illuminates the white interior. “What the hell is this, Donel? I thought this was Siri’s tomb.”

“It is, Father.”

“Where is she interred? Under the floor for Chrissake?”

Donel mops at his brow. I remember that it is his mother I am speaking of. I also remember that he has had almost two years to accustom himself to the idea of her death.

“No one told you?” he asks.

“Told me what?” The anger and confusion is already ebbing. “I was rushed here from the dropship station and told that I was to visit Siri’s tomb before the farcaster opening. What?”

“Mother was cremated as per her instructions. Her ashes were spread on the Great South Sea from the highest platform of the family isle.”

“Then why this ... *crypt*?” I watch what I say. Donel is sensitive.

He mops his brow again and glances toward the door. We are shielded from the view of the crowd but we are far behind schedule. Already the other members of the Council have had to hurry down the hill to join the other dignitaries on the bandstand. My slow grief this day has been worse than bad timing—it has turned into bad theater.

“Mother left instructions. They were carried out.” He touches a panel on the inner wall and it slides up to reveal a small niche containing a metal box. My name is on it.

“What is that?”

Donel shakes his head. “Personal items Mother left for you. Only Magritte knew the details and she died last winter without telling anyone.”

“All right,” I say. “Thank you. I’ll be out in a moment.”

Donel glances at his chronometer. “The ceremony begins in eight minutes. They will activate the farcaster in twenty minutes.”

“I know,” I say. I do know. Part of me knows precisely how much time is left. “I’ll be out in a moment.”

Donel hesitates and then departs. I close the door behind him with a touch of my palm. The metal box is surprisingly heavy. I set it on the stone floor and crouch beside it. A smaller palmlock gives me access. The lid clicks open and I peer into the container.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I say softly. I do not know what I expected—artifacts perhaps, nostalgic mementos of our hundred and three days

together—perhaps a pressed flower from some forgotten offering or the frenchhorn conch we dove for off Fevarone. But there are no mementos—not as such.

The box holds a small Steiner-Ginn handlaser, one of the most powerful projection weapons ever made. The accumulator is attached by a powerlead to a small fusion-cell that Siri must have cannibalized from her new submersible. Also attached to the fusion-cell is an ancient comlog, an antique with a solid state interior and a liquid crystal diskey. The charge indicator glows green.

There are two other objects in the box. One is the translator medallion we had used so long ago. The final object makes me smile ruefully.

“Why you little bitch,” I say softly. I know now where Siri had been when I awoke alone that first time in the hills above Firstsite. I shake my head and smile again. “You dear, conniving, little bitch.” There, rolled carefully, powerleads correctly attached, lies the hawking mat which Mike Osho had purchased for thirty marks in Carvnal Market.

I leave the hawking mat there, disconnect the comlog, and lift it out. The device is ancient, possibly dating back to pre-Hegira times. I can imagine it being handed down in Siri’s family from the seedship generation. I sit cross-legged on the cold stone and thumb the diskey. The light in the crypt fades and suddenly Siri is there before me.

• • •

They did not throw me off the ship when Mike died. They could have but they did not. They did not leave me to the mercy of provincial justice on Maui-Covenant. They could have but they chose not to. For two days I was held in Security and questioned, once by Shipmaster Singh himself. Then they let me return to duty. For the four months of the long leap back I tortured myself with the memory of Mike’s murder. I knew that in my clumsy way I had helped to murder him. I put in my shifts, dreamed my sweaty nightmares, and wondered if they would dismiss me when we reached the web. They could have told me but they chose not to.

They did not dismiss me. I was to have my normal leave in the web but could take no off-Ship R-and-R while in the Maui-Covenant system. In addition, there was a written reprimand and temporary reduction in rank. That was what Mike’s life had been worth—a reprimand and reduction in rank.

I took my three-week leave with the rest of the crew but unlike the others I did not plan to return. I farcast to Esperance and made the classic Shipman’s mistake of trying to visit family. Two days in the crowded residential hive was enough and I stepped to Lusus and took my pleasure in three days of whoring on the *Rue des Chats*. When my mood turned

darker I 'cast to Ouster and lost most of my ready marks betting on the bloody Shrike fights there.

Finally I found myself farcasting to Homesystem Station and taking the two-day pilgrim shuttle down to Hellas Basin. I had never been to Homesystem or Mars before and I never plan to return, but the ten days I spent there, alone and wandering the dusty, haunted corridors of the Monastery, served to send me back to the Ship. Back to Siri.

Occasionally I would leave the red-stoned maze of the megalith and, clad only in skinsuit and mask, stand on one of the uncounted thousands of stone balconies and stare skyward at the pale gray star which had once been Old Earth. Sometimes then I thought of the brave and stupid idealists heading out into the great dark in their slow and leaking ships, carrying embryos and ideologies with equal faith and care. But most times I did not try to think. Most times I simply stood in the purple night and let Siri come to me. There in the Master's Rock, where perfect satori had eluded so many much more worthy pilgrims, I achieved it through the memory of a not-quite sixteen-year-old womanchild's body lying next to mine while moonlight spilled from a Thomas Hawk's wings.

When the *Los Angeles* spun back up to a quantum state, I went with her. Four months later I was content to pull my shift with the construction crew, plug into my usual stims, and sleep my R-and-R away. Then Singh came to me. "You're going down," he said. I did not understand. "In the past eleven years the groundlings have turned your screw-up with Osho into a goddamned legend," said Singh. "There's an entire cultural mythos built around your little roll in the hay with that colonial girl."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I was irritated and frightened. "Are you throwing me off the Ship?"

Singh grunted and brushed idly at his right eyebrow. The gold bracelet on his wrist caught the light. "Did you know that your groundside girlfriend was a member of their original Shipmaster's family?" he asked. "Sort of the local equivalent of royalty."

"Siri?" I said stupidly.

"She told the story of your ... what shall we call it ... your love affair to everyone she could. Poems have been written about it. There was a play performed every year on one of those floating islands of theirs. Evidently there's an entire cult that's sprung up. You seem to be at the center of a romantic legend that's caught the imagination of most of the yokels on the planet."

"Are you throwing me off the Ship?"

"Don't be stupid, Aspic," growled Singh. "You'll spend your three weeks of leave groundside. The Hegemony needs this planet. The Ambassador says that we need the cooperation of the groundlings until the farcaster's operational and we get some occupation troops through. If this

half-assed, star-crossed-lovers myth can smooth things for us during the next few trips, fine. The experts say you'll do the Hegemony more good down there than up here. We'll see."

"Siri?" I said again.

"Get your gear," ordered Singh. "You're going down."

The world was waiting. Crowds were cheering. Siri was waving. We left the harbor in a yellow catamaran and sailed south-southeast, bound for the Archipelago and her family isle.

"Hello, Merin." Siri floats in the darkness of her tomb. The holo is not perfect; a haziness mars the edges. But it is Siri—Siri as I last saw her, gray hair shorn rather than cut, head high, face sharpened with shadows. "Hello, Merin my love."

"Hello, Siri," I say. The tomb door is closed.

"I am sorry I cannot share our Sixth Reunion, Merin. I looked forward to it." Siri pauses and looks down at her hands. The image flickers slightly as dust motes float through her form. "I had carefully planned what to say here," she goes on. "How to say it. Arguments to be pled. Instructions to be given. But I know now how useless that would have been. Either I have said it already and you have heard or there is nothing left to say and silence would best suit the moment."

Siri's voice had grown even more beautiful with age. There is a fullness and calmness there which can come only from knowing pain. Siri moves her hands and they disappear beyond the border of the projection. "Merin my love, how strange our days apart and together have been. How beautifully absurd the myth that bound us. My days were but heartbeats to you. I hated you for that. You were the mirror that would not lie. If you could have seen your face at the beginning of each Reunion! The least you could have done was to hide your shock ... that, at least, you could have done for me.

"But through your clumsy naïveté there has always been ... what? ... something, Merin. There is something there that belies the callowness and thoughtless egotism which you wear so well. A caring, perhaps. A *respect* for caring, if nothing else.

"Therein lay the slim basis for so much hope through these long years, Merin. Even through your Hive-born and Ship-bred shallowness there was that sense of caring. I believe ... no, I *know* that you sometimes cared for me. If you could care for me, you could care for our world. In our brief hours of sharing, you might find an understanding. Therein lay our hope. Therein lay the only possible source of our salvation.

"I confess that I did not plan this when I stole your silly flying carpet. I don't know now *what* I was thinking and planning when I let you lead me from the Festival that first time. Of kidnapping you, perhaps. Of

delaying and seducing you until Uncle Gresham could use any information you might have. Perhaps I dreamed even then of your joining us, of both of us swimming free with the Sea Folk and protecting the Covenant together. Then Bertol ruined everything ...

“I miss you, Merin. Tonight I will go down to the harbor and watch the stars awhile and think of you. It will not be the first time I have done that.

“I’m sorry that I will not be waiting for you this time, Merin. But our world will be waiting. The seas that I listen to tonight will greet you with the same song. Preserving that song is not such an impossible idea, my love. They can’t have this world without controlling the isles and the Sea Folk control the isles.

“I’ve kept this diary since I was thirteen. It has hundreds of entries. By the time you see this, they will all have been erased except the few that follow. Our love was not all myth and machination. We were good friends and some of our times together were sweet, were they not?

“Stay well, Merin. Stay well.”

I shut off the comlog and sit in silence for a minute. The crowd sounds are barely audible through the thick walls of the tomb. I take a breath and thumb the diskey.

Siri appears. She is in her late forties. I know immediately the day and place she recorded this image. I remember the cloak she wears, the eelstone pendant at her neck, and the strand of hair which has escaped her barrette and even now falls across her cheek. I remember everything about that day. It was the last day of our Third Reunion and we were with friends on the heights above South Tern. Donel was ten and we were trying to convince him to slide on the snowfield with us. He was crying. Siri turned away from us even before the skimmer settled. When Magritte stepped out we knew from Siri’s face that something had happened.

The same face stares at me now. She brushes absently at the unruly strand of hair. Her eyes are red but her voice is controlled. “Merin, they killed our son today. Alón was twenty-one and they killed him. You were so confused today, Merin. ‘How could such a mistake have happened?’ you kept repeating. You did not really know our son but I could see the loss in your face when we heard. Merin, it was not an accident. If nothing else survives, no other record, if you never understand why I allowed a sentimental myth to rule my life, let this be known—*it was not an accident that killed Alón*. He was with the Separatists when the Council police arrived. Even then he could have escaped. We had prepared an alibi together. The police would have believed his story. He chose to stay.

“Today, Merin, you were impressed with what I said to the crowd ... the mob ... at the embassy. Know this, Shipman—when I said,

‘Now is not the time to show your anger and your hatred,’ that is precisely what I meant. No more, no less. Today is not the time. But the day will come. It will surely come. The Covenant was not taken lightly in those final days, Merin. It is not taken lightly now. Those who have forgotten will be surprised when the day comes but it will surely come.

The image fades to another and in the split second of overlap the face of a 26-year-old Siri appears superimposed on the older woman’s features. “Merin, I am pregnant. I’m so glad. You’ve been gone five weeks now and I *miss* you. Ten years you’ll be gone. More than that. Merin, why didn’t you think to invite me to go with you? I could not have gone, but I would have loved it if you had just *invited* me. But I’m pregnant, Merin. The doctors say that it will be a boy. I will tell him about you, my love. Perhaps someday you and he will sail in the Archipelago and listen to the songs of the Sea Folk as you and I have done these past few weeks. Perhaps you’ll understand them by then. Merin, I *miss* you. Please hurry back.”

The holographic image shimmers and shifts. The 16-year-old girl is red-faced. Her long hair cascades over bare shoulders and a white nightgown. She speaks in a rush, racing tears. “Shipman Merin Aspic, I’m sorry about your friend—I really am—but you left without even saying *good-bye*. I had such plans about how you would help us … how you and I … you didn’t even say good-bye. I don’t care *what* happens to you. I hope you go back to your stinking, crowded Hegemony hives and rot for all I care. In fact, Merin Aspic, I wouldn’t want to see you again even if they paid me. *Good-bye.*”

She turns her back before the projection fades. It is dark in the tomb now but the audio continues for a second. There is a soft chuckle and Siri’s voice—I cannot tell the age—comes one last time. “Adieu, Merin, Adieu.”

“Adieu,” I say and thumb the diskey off.

The crowd parts as I emerge blinking from the tomb. My poor timing has ruined the drama of the event and now the smile on my face incites angry whispers. Loudspeakers carry the rhetoric of the official ceremony even to our hilltop. “… beginning a new era of cooperation,” echoes the rich voice of the Ambassador.

I set the box on the grass and remove the hawking mat. The crowd presses forward to see as I unroll the carpet. The tapestry is faded but the flight threads gleam like new copper. I sit in the center of the mat and slide the heavy box on behind me.

“… and more will follow until space and time will cease to be

obstacles.”

The crowd moves back as I tap the flight design and the hawking mat rises four meters into the air. Now I can see beyond the roof of the tomb. The islands are returning to form the Equatorial Archipelago. I can see them, hundreds of them, borne up out of the hungry south by gentle winds.

“So it is with great pleasure that I close this circuit and welcome you, the colony of Maui-Covenant, into the community of the Hegemony of Man.”

The thin thread of the ceremonial com-laser pulses to the zenith. There is a spattering of applause and the band begins playing. I squint skyward just in time to see a new star being born. Part of me knows to the microsecond what has just occurred.

For a few microseconds the farcaster had been functional. For a few microseconds time and space *had* ceased to be obstacles. Then the massive tidal pull of the artificial singularity triggered the thermite charge I had placed on the outer containment sphere. That tiny explosion had not been visible but a second later the expanding Schwarzschild radius is eating its shell, swallowing thirty-six thousand tons of fragile dodecahedron, and growing quickly to gobble several thousand kilometers of space around it. And *that* is visible—magnificently visible—as a miniature nova flares whitely in the clear blue sky.

The band stops playing. People scream and run for cover. There is no reason to. There is a burst of X-rays tunneling out as the farcaster continues to collapse into itself, but not enough to cause harm through Maui-Covenant’s generous atmosphere. A second streak of plasma becomes visible as the *Los Angeles* puts more distance between itself and the rapidly decaying little black hole. The winds rise and the seas are choppier. There will be strange tides tonight.

I want to say something profound but I can think of nothing. Besides, the crowd is in no mood to listen. I tell myself that I can hear some cheers mixed in with the screams and shouts.

I tap at the flight designs and the hawking mat speeds out over the cliff and above the harbor. A Thomas Hawk lazing on mid-day thermals flaps in panic at my approach.

“Let them come!” I shout at the fleeing hawk. “Let them come! I’ll be thirty-five and not alone and let them come if they dare!” I drop my fist and laugh. The wind is blowing my hair and cooling the sweat on my chest and arms.

Cooler now, I take a sighting and set my course for the most distant of the isles. I look forward to meeting the others. Even more, I look forward to talking to the Sea Folk and telling them that it is time for the Shark to come at last to the seas of Maui-Covenant.

Later, when the battles are won and the world is theirs, I will tell them about her. I will sing to them of Siri.

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## INTRODUCTION TO “THE DEATH OF THE CENTAUR”

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I was a teacher for eighteen years. Not a college professor ... not even a high school English teacher ... “just” an elementary teacher. Over the years I taught third grade, fourth grade, and sixth grade, spent a year as a “resource teacher,” (sort of a lifeguard for kids in danger of going under because of learning problems) and ended my career in education by spending four years creating, coordinating, and teaching very advanced programs for “gifted and talented” (i.e., smart and able) students in a district with seven thousand elementary-aged children.

I mention all this as background to the next story.

Teaching is a profession which is not quite a profession. As recently as twenty-five years ago, teachers balanced their low pay with whatever satisfaction they could find in the job—and there is plenty for a good teacher—and by enjoying a certain indefinable sense of status in the eyes of the community.

Some years ago when I was a sixth grade teacher, I stepped outside one winter evening to see the Colorado skies ablaze with a disturbing light. It was the aurora borealis, of course, in what may well be the most dramatic display I’ll ever see from these latitudes.

As I stood watching this incredible light show, a young student of mine and her mother came down the street and asked what was going on. I explained about the aurora.

“Oh,” said the mother. “I thought maybe it was the end of the world like it predicts in Revelation, but Jesse said you’d know if it was something else.”

I think of that moment occasionally.

It used to be that teachers were—if not exactly the sages of society—at least respected as minor but necessary intellectual components in the community. Now, when parents go in to a parent/teacher conference, the odds are great that the parents are better educated than the teacher. Even if they’re not, they almost certainly make significantly more *money* than the

teacher.

Of course it's not just the low pay that is driving good people out of teaching; it's not even the combination of low pay, contempt from the community, contempt from school and district administrators who see master teachers as a liability (they would rather have beginning teachers whose *tabulas* are perfectly *rasa* and ready to be programmed with whatever new district fads the administration is pushing), and the fact that many children today are not pleasant to be around. Perhaps it's all this plus the reality that teaching is no longer a place for people with imagination. Creative people need not apply. Most don't.

The point of all this is that just at the time when we most desperately need quality teachers, just when our intellectual survival now demands men and women in the classroom who teach so well and make our children *think* so well that we'll have no choice but to pay that teacher the ultimate teacher's compliment—condemnation to death by hemlock or crucifixion; just at the time now when families and all the other traditional institutions are abdicating their responsibilities in everything from teaching ethics to basic hygiene, abandoning the effort it takes to turn young savages into citizens; surrendering and handing these duties to *schools* ... that happens to be the time when the schools lack the small but critical mass of brilliant, creative, and dedicated people who've always made the system work.

To compensate, teachers hang signs in their faculty lounges. The signs say things like—"A teacher's influence touches eternity."

It may. It may. But take it from somebody who was in there pitching for eighteen years—good teachers are invaluable, more precious than platinum or presidents, but a bad teacher's influence touches the same eternity.

## THE DEATH OF THE CENTAUR

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The teacher and the boy climbed the steep arc of lawn that overlooked the southernmost curve of the Missouri River. Occasionally they glanced up at the stately brick mansion that held the high ground. Its tiers of tall windows and wide French doors reflected the broken patterns of bare branches against a gray sky. Both the boy and the young man knew the big house was most likely empty—its owner spent only a few weeks a year in town—but approaching so close afforded them the pleasurable tension of trespass as well as an outstanding view.

A hundred feet from the mansion they stopped climbing and sat down, backs against a tree which shielded them from the slight breeze and protected them from the casual notice of anyone in the house. The sun was very warm, a false spring warmth which would almost surely be driven off by at least one more snowstorm before returning in earnest. The wide expanse of lawn, dropping down to the railroad tracks and the river two hundred yards below, had the faint, green splotchiness of thawing earth. The air smelled like Saturday.

The teacher took up a short blade of grass, rolled it in his fingers, and began to chew on it thoughtfully. The boy pulled a piece, squinted at it for a long second, and did likewise.

“Mr. Kennan, d’you think the river’s gonna rise again this year and flood everythin’ like it done before?” asked the boy.

“I don’t know, Terry,” said the young man. He did not turn to look at the boy, but raised his face to the sun and closed his eyes.

The boy looked sideways at his teacher and noticed how the red hairs in the man’s beard glinted in the sunlight. Terry put his head back against the rough bark of the old elm but was too animated to shut his eyes for more than a few seconds.

“Do you figure it’ll flood Main if it does?”

“I doubt it, Terry. That kind of flood only comes along every few years.”

Neither participant in the conversation found it strange that the teacher

was commenting on events which he had never experienced first hand. Kennan had been in the small Missouri town just under seven months, having arrived on an incredibly hot Labor Day just before school began. By then the flood had been old news for four months. Terry Bester, although only ten years old, had seen three such floods in his life and he remembered the cursing and thumping in the morning darkness the previous April when the volunteer firemen had called his father down to work on the levee.

A train whistle came to them from the north, the Dopplered noise sounding delicate in the warm air. The teacher opened his eyes to await the coming of the eleven a.m. freight to St. Louis. Both counted the cars as the long train roared below them, diesel throbbing, whistle rising in pitch and then dropping as the last cars disappeared toward town around the bend in the track where they had just walked.

"Whew, good thing we wasn't down there," said Terry loudly.

"Weren't," said Mr. Kennan.

"Huh?" said Terry and looked at the man.

"We weren't down there," repeated the bearded young man with a hint of irritation in his voice.

"Yeah," said Terry and there was a silence. Mr. Kennan closed his eyes and rested his head against the tree trunk once again. Terry stood to throw imaginary stones at the mansion. Sensing his teacher's disapproval, he stopped the pantomime and stood facing the tree, resting his chin against the bark and squinting up at the high branches. Far overhead a squirrel leaped.

"Twenty-six," said Terry.

"What's that?"

"Cars on that train. I counted twenty-six."

"Mmmmm. I counted twenty-four."

"Yeah. Me too. That's what I meant to say. Twenty-four, I meant."

Kennan sat forward and rolled the blade of grass in his hands. His thoughts were elsewhere. Terry rode an invisible horse around in tight circles while making galloping sounds deep in his throat. He added the phlegmy noise of a rifle shot, grabbed at his chest, and tumbled off the horse. The boy rolled bonelessly down the hill and came to a contorted, grass-covered stop not three feet from his teacher.

Kennan glanced at him and then looked out at the river. The Missouri moved by, coffee brown, complicated by never repeating patterns of swirls and eddies.

"Terry, did you know that this is the southernmost bend of the Missouri River? Right here?"

"Uh-uh," said the boy.

"It is," said the teacher and looked across at the far shore.

“Hey, Mr. Kennan?”

“Yes?”

“What’s gonna happen on Monday?”

“What do you mean?” asked Kennan, knowing what he meant.

“You know, in the Story.”

The young man laughed and tossed away the blade of grass. For a brief second Terry thought that his teacher threw like a girl, but he immediately banished that from his mind.

“You know I can’t tell you ahead of the others, Terry. That wouldn’t be fair, would it?”

“Awww,” said the boy but it was a perfunctory whine, and something in the tone suggested that he was pleased with the response. The two stood up. Kennan brushed off the seat of his pants, and then pulled bits of grass from the child’s tangled hair. Together they walked back down the hill in the direction of the rail line and town.

The centaur, the neo-cat, and the sorcerer-ape moved across the endless Sea of Grass. Gernisavien was too short to see above the high grass and had to ride on Raul’s back. The centaur did not mind—he did not even notice her weight—and he enjoyed talking to her as he breasted the rippling waves of lemon-colored grass. Behind them came Dobby, ambling along in his comical, anthropoid stride and humming snatches of unintelligible tunes.

For nine days they waded the Sea of Grass. Far behind were the Haunted Ruins and the threat of the ratspiders. Far ahead—not yet in sight—was their immediate goal of the Mountains of Mist. At night Dobby would unsling his massive shoulder pack and retrieve the great silken umbrella of their tent. Intricate orange markings decorated the blue dome. Gernisavien loved the sound created as the evening wind came up and stirred a thousand miles of grass while rustling the silken canopy above them.

They were very careful with their fire. A single careless spark could ignite the entire Sea and there would be no escape.

Raul would return from his evening hunt with his bow over a shoulder and a limp grazer in one massive hand. After dinner they often talked softly or listened to Dobby play the strange wind instrument he had found in the Man Ruins. As the night grew later, Dobby would point out the constellations—the Swan, Mellam’s Bow, the Crystal Skyship, and the Little Lyre. Raul would tell stories of courage and sacrifice handed down through six generations of Centaur Clan warriors.

One evening after they had carefully doused the fire, Gernisavien spoke. Her voice seemed tiny under the blaze of stars and was almost lost in the great sighing of wind in the grass.

“What are our chances of actually finding the farcaster?”

“We can’t know that,” came Raul’s firm voice. “We just have to keep heading south and do our best.”

“But what if the Wizards get there first?” persisted the tawny neo-cat.

It was Dobby who answered. “Best we not discuss the Wizards at night,” he said. “Never talk about scaly things after dark, that’s what my old Granmum used to say.”

In the morning they ate a cold breakfast, looked at the magic needle on Dobby’s direction finder, and once again picked up the journey. The sun was close to the zenith when Raul suddenly froze and pointed to the east.

“Look!”

At first Gernisavien could see nothing, but after taking a handful of Raul’s mane to steady herself and standing on his broad back, she could make out—sails! Billowing white sails against an azure sky. And beneath the straining canvas she could see a ship—a huge ship—creaking along on wooden wheels that must have been twenty feet high.

And it was headed right for them!

The classroom was ugly and uncomfortable. For a long time it had been used as a storeroom and even now the walls were marked and gashed where boxes and metal map cases had been stored.

The room, like the school, was old but not picturesque. It evoked no Norman Rockwell twinges of nostalgia. The once-high ceilings had been lowered with ill-fitting accoustical tiles that cut off the top third of the windows. Tubular fluorescent lights hung from gray bars that emerged through holes in the ceiling tiles. The floors once had been smooth and varnished but were now splintered to the point that students could not risk taking off their soaked tennis shoes on wet days.

Twenty-eight plastic pink-and-tan metal desks filled a space designed for three rows of wooden schooldesks from a previous century. The desks were old enough that their tilted tops were carved and scratched and their ugly, tubular legs gouged new splinters from the floor. It was impossible to place a pencil on a desktop without it rolling noisily, and every time a child lifted the desktop to reach for a book, the little room echoed to the sound of screeching metal and notebooks falling to the floor.

The windows were high and warped and all but one refused to open. The previous September, when the temperature continued to hover near ninety degrees and children’s sneakers sank into the asphalt playground, the little room was almost unlivable with only a rare stirring of breeze coming through the windows.

The chalkboard was four feet wide and had a crack running along the right side. Kennan had once used it to illustrate the San Andreas Fault. On

his first day he had discovered that the room had no chalk, only one eraser, no yardstick, no globe, only one pull-down map (and that predating World War Two), no bookshelves, and a clock permanently frozen at one twenty-three. Kennan had requisitioned a wall clock on the third of September and an old one was mounted next to the door by the end of January. It stopped frequently so Kennan kept a cheap alarm clock on his desk. Its ticking had become background noise to all the other sounds in the room. Occasionally he set the alarm to signify the end of a quiz or silent reading period. On the last day before Christmas vacation, he had let the alarm go off at two o'clock to herald the end of work and the beginning of their hour-long Christmas party. The other classes reserved only the last twenty minutes of the day for their parties and although Kennan was reprimanded by the principal for not reading the school policy booklet, the incident confirmed the suspicion of most of the children in the school that Mr. Kennan's class was a fun place to be.

Kennan's memory of that Christmas season would always be linked with the musty, dimly lit basement of Reardon's Department Store, a faded and failing five and dime store on Water Street, where he had shopped for his fourth graders' presents late one evening. One by one he had selected the cheap rings, jars of bubble-blowing liquid, toy soldiers, balsa wood gliders, and model kits—each with a special message in mind—taking them home to wrap until the early morning hours.

Kennan had covered the chipped walls of the classroom with posters, including the illustrated map of Boston which had hung in his dorm room for three years. He changed the one bulletin board every three weeks. Now it boasted a huge map of the planet Garden on which the events of The Story were marked.

There was nothing he could do about the faint odor of rotting plaster and seeping sewage that permeated the room. Nor could he change the irritating buzz and flicker of the overhead lights. But he bought an old armchair at a fleamarket and borrowed an area rug from his landlord and every afternoon at one-ten, just after lunch period and just before language arts, Kennan sat in the sprung chair and twenty-seven children crowded into the carpeted corner and the tale resumed.

Gernisavien and Dobby paid their last two credit coins to enter the huge arena where Raul was scheduled to fight the Invincible Shrike. All around them were the dark alleys and gabled rooftops of legendary Carvnal. They pushed through the entrance tunnel with the crowd and came out in the tiered amphitheatre where hundreds of torches cast bizarre shadows up into the stands.

Around the circular pit were crowded all the races of Garden, or rather, all those races which had not been exterminated resisting the evil

Wizards: the hooded Druids, brachiate tree dwellers from the Great Forest, a band of fuzzies in their bright orange robes, many lizard soldiers hissing and laughing and shouting, stubby little Marsh Folk, and hundreds of mutants. The night air was filled with strange sounds and stranger smells. Vendors bellowed over the noise to hawk their fried argot wings and cold beer. Out in the arena, work crews raked sand over the drying pools of blood that marked the spots where earlier Death Game contestants had lost to the Shrike.

“Why does he have to fight?” asked Gernisavien as they took their places on the rough bench.

“It’s the only way to earn a thousand credits so we can take the Sky Galleon south tomorrow morning,” Dobby answered in a low voice. A tall mutant sat down next to him on the bench, and Dobby had to tug to retrieve the end of his purple cape.

“But why can’t we just leave the city or take the raft farther south?” persisted Gernisavien. The little neo-cat’s tail was flicking back and forth.

“Raul explained all that,” whispered Dobby. “The Wizards know that we’re in Carvnal. They must already be covering the city gates and the docks. Besides, with their flying platforms we could never outdistance them on foot or by raft. No, Raul’s right, this is the only way.”

“But *no one* beats the Shrike! Isn’t that right? The thing was genetically designed during the Wizard Wars as a killing machine, wasn’t it?” Gernisavien said miserably. She squinted as if the light from the stadium torches hurt her eyes.

“Yes,” said Dobby, “but he doesn’t have to *beat* it to earn the thousand credits. Just stay alive for three minutes in the same arena.”

“Has anyone ever done that?” Gernisavien’s whisper was ragged.

“Well … I think …” began Dobby but was interrupted by a blare of trumpets from the arena. There was an immediate hushing of crowd noise. The torches seemed to flare more brightly and on one side of the wide pit a heavy portcullis drew up into the wall.

*What’s a portcullis?*

It’s like a big, heavy gate with spikes on the bottom. So every eye in the stadium was on that black hole in the wall. There was a long minute of silence so deep that you could hear the torches crackling and sputtering. Then the Shrike came out.

It was about seven and a half feet tall and it gleamed like polished steel in the light. Razor sharp spikes curled out like scythe blades from various parts of its smooth, metallic exoskeleton. Its elbows and knees were protected by rings of natural armor which also were covered by short spikes. There was even a spike protruding from its high forehead, just above where the red, multi-faceted eyes blazed like flaming rubies. Its hands were claws with five curved, metal blades that opened and closed

so quickly that they were only a blur. The claws went snicker-snack, snicker-snack.

The Shrike moved out to the center of the arena slowly, lurching along like a sharp-edged sculpture learning how to walk. Its head lifted, the fighting beak snapped, and the red eyes searched the crowd as if seeking future victims.

Suddenly the stillness was broken as the hundreds of spectators began boozing and jeering and throwing small items. Through it all the Shrike stood motionless and mute, seemingly unaware of the barrage of noise and missiles. Only once—when a large melon flew from the stands and headed straight for the Shrike's head—only then did it descend to move. But how it moved! The Shrike leaped twenty feet to one side with a jump so incredibly fast that the terrible creature was invisible for a second. The crowd hushed in awe.

Then the trumpets sounded again, a tall wooden door opened, and the first contestant of the Late Games entered. It was a rock giant much like the one that had chased Dobby when they were crossing the Mountains of Mist. But this one was bigger—at least twelve feet tall—and it looked to be made of solid muscle.

"I hope he doesn't beat the Shrike and take the prize before Raul gets to fight," said Dobby. Gernisavien flashed the sorcerer-ape a disapproving glance.

It was over in twenty seconds. One moment the two opponents stood facing each other in the torchlight and an instant later the Shrike was back in the center of the ring and the rock giant was lying in various parts of the arena. Some of the pieces were still twitching.

There were four more contestants. Two were obvious suicides—whom the crowd booed loudly—one was a drunken lizard soldier with a high-powered crossbow, and the last was a fierce mutant with body armor of his own and a battle-axe twice as tall as Gernisavien. None of them lasted a minute.

Then the trumpets sounded again and Raul cantered into the arena. Gernisavien watched through her fingers as the handsome centaur, upper body oiled and glistening, moved toward the waiting Shrike. Raul was carrying only his hunting spear and a light shield. No—wait—there was a small bottle hanging from a thong around his neck.

"What's that?" asked Gernisavien, her voice sounding lost and quavery even to herself.

Dobby did not take his eyes off the arena as he answered. "A chemical I found in the Man Ruins. May the gods grant that I mixed it right."

Down in the arena the Shrike began its attack.

*Dear Whitney,*

Yes—you’re right—this part of the country *is* the seventh circle of desolation. Sometimes I walk down the street (my “home” here is on a hill, if you can call furnished rooms in a rotting old brick house a home) and catch a glimpse of the Missouri River and remember those great days we had out on the Cape during spring break of our senior year. Remember the time we went riding along the beach and a thunderstorm came boiling in from the Bay and Pomegranate got so spooked? (And we had to ... ahem ... wait it out in the boathouse?)

Glad to hear that you enjoy working in the Senator’s office. Do all you Wellesley girls ascend directly into jobs like that or do most end up at Katie Gibbs School for Future Secretaries? (Sorry about that—someone stuck in the Meerschaum Pipe Capital of the World as I am shouldn’t throw stones ... or stow thrones for that matter. *Did* you know that every corncob pipe in the western hemisphere comes from this town? I’ve got two inches of white soot on my windowsill and on the hood of my car to prove it!)

No—I *don’t* get into St. Louis very much. It’s about a fifty mile trip and the Volvo has been sitting by the curb for over a month. The head gasket is shot and it takes about ten years to get a part sent out here. I was lucky even to find a garage with metric tools. I did take the bus into the Big City three weeks ago. Went right after school Friday and got home Sunday evening in time to get depressed and to do my lesson plans. Ended up not seeing much except three movies and a lot of bookstores. Finally took a tour of the Gateway Arch. (No—I will *not* bore you with the details.) The best part of the weekend was enjoying the amenities of a good hotel for two nights.

To answer your question—I’m *not* totally sorry that I came out West to go to grad school in St. Louis. It was a good program (who can beat an 11-month Masters program?) but I hadn’t anticipated that I’d be too poor to escape this goddamn state without teaching here for a year. Even that might have been OK if I could have found a position in Webster Groves or University City ... but the Meerschaum Pipe Capital of the World? This place—and the people—are straight out of *Deliverance*.

Still—it’s only a year, and if I get a job with Hovane Acad or the Experimental School (have you *seen* Fentworth recently?), this year could be invaluable background experience.

So you want to hear more about my students? What can you say about a bunch of bucolic fourth graders? I’ve already told you about some of the antics of Crazy Donald. If this podunk district had any real special ed or remedial programs he’d be in them all. Instead, I throw a lasso on him and try to keep him from hurting anyone. So let’s see, who does that leave to tell you about?

Monica—our resident nine-year-old sexpot. She has her eye on me but

she'll settle for Craig Stears in the sixth grade if I'm not available.

Sara—a real sweet kid. A curly-haired, heart-faced little cutie. I like Sara. Her mother died last year and I think she needs an extra dose of affection.

Brad—Brad's the class moron. Dumber than Donald, if that's possible. He's been retained twice. (Yes ... this district *does* flunk kids ... *and* spank them.) Not a discipline problem, Brad's just a big, dumb cluck in bib overalls and a bowl haircut.

Teresa—Here's a girl after your own heart, Whit. A horse nut! Has a gelding which she enters in shows around here and in Illinois. But I'm afraid Teresa's into the Cowgirl Mystique. Probably wouldn't know an English riding saddle if she sat on it. The kid wears cowboy boots to school every day and keeps a currycomb in her desk.

And then there's Chuck & Orville(!) & William-call- me-Bill & Theresa (another one) & Bobby Lee & Alice & Alice's twin sister Agnes & etc. & etc ...

Oh, I mentioned Terry Bester last time, but I do want to tell you more about him. He's a homely little kid—all overbite and receding chin. His hair hangs in his eyes and his mother must trim it with hedgeclippers. He wears the same filthy plaid shirt every day of the year and his boots have holes in them and one heel gone. (Get the picture? This kid's straight out of Tobacco Road!)

Still—Terry's my favorite. On the first day of school I was making some point and waving my arm around in my usual, histrionic fashion and Terry (who sits right up front, unlike most of the other boys) made a dive for the floor. I started to get mad at him for clowning around and then noticed his face. The kid was scared to death! Obviously he was getting the shit beat out of him at home and had ducked out of habit.

Terry seems determined to fit every poor-kid stereotype. He even drags around this homemade shoeshine box and makes a few quarters shining these hillbillies' boots down at the Dew Drop Inn and Berringer's Bar & Grill where his old man hangs out.

Anyway, to make a long story short, the little guy has been spending a lot of time with me. He often shows up at the back porch here about five-thirty or six o'clock. Frequently I invite him to stay for dinner—although when I tell him I'm busy and I have to write or something, he doesn't seem to resent it and he's back the next night. Sometimes when I'm reading I forget he's there until ten or eleven o'clock. His parents don't seem to care where he is or when he gets home. When I got back from my weekend in St. Louis, there was 'ol Terry sitting on my back steps with that absurd shoeshine kit. For all I know he'd been sitting there since Friday night.

Last weekend he calmly mentioned something that made my hair

stand on end. He said that last year when he was in third grade “Ma and the Old Man got in a terrible fight.” Finally Ma locked the front door when the drunken father stepped out onto the porch to scream at the neighbors or something. The guy just got madder and madder when he couldn’t get back in and started shouting that he was going to kill them all. Terry says that he was hugging his six-year-old sister, his Ma was crying and screaming, and then the Old Man kicked in the door. He proceeded to hit Terry’s mother in the mouth and drag the two kids out to his pickup truck. He drove them up Sawmill Road (in nearby Boone National Forest) and finally jerked the children out of the cab and pulled his shotgun off the rack. (*Everybody carries guns in their pickups here, Whit. I’ve been thinking of getting a gun rack for the Volvo!*)

You can imagine Terry telling me all of this. Every once in a while he’d pause to brush the hair out of his eyes, but his voice was as calm as if he were telling me the plot of a TV show he’d seen once.

So the father drags eight-year-old Terry and his little sister into the trees and tells them to get down on their knees and pray to God for forgiveness because he’s got to shoot them. Terry says that the old drunk was waving the double-barreled shotgun at them and that his little sister, Cindy, just “went and wet her panties, then and there.” Instead of shooting, Terry’s father just lurched off into the woods and stood there cussing at the sky for several minutes. Then he stuck the kids back in the pickup and drove them home. The mother never filed charges.

I’ve seen Mr. Bester around town. He reminds me of whatshisname in the movie version of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. You know, the racist farmer that Boo Radley kills. Wait a minute, I’ll look it up. (Bob Ewell!)

So you can see why I’m allowing Terry to spend so much time with me. He needs a positive male role model around … as well as a sensitive adult to talk to and learn from. I’d consider adopting Terry if that were possible.

So now you know a little bit of how the other half lives. That’s one reason why this year’s been so important even if it has been sheer purgatory. Part of me can’t wait to get back to you and the sea and a real city where people speak correctly and where you can walk into a drugstore and order a frappe without being stared at. But part of me knows how important this year is—both for me and the kids I’m touching by being here. Just the oral tradition of the story that I’m telling them is something they would never get otherwise.

Well, I’m out of paper and it’s almost one a.m. School tomorrow. Give my best to your family, Whit, and tell the Senator to keep up the good work. With any luck (and the head gasket willing) you’ll be seeing me sometime in mid-June.

Take care. Please write. It’s lonely out here in the Missouri woods.

The great Sky Galleon moved between high banks of stratocumulus that caught the last pink rays of sunset. Raul, Dobby, and Gernisavien stood on the deck and watched the great orb of the sun slowly sink into the layer of clouds beneath them. From time to time, Captain Kokus would bellow orders to the chimp-sailors who scampered through the rigging and sails far above the deck. Occasionally the captain turned and murmured quiet orders to the mate, who spoke into the metal speaking tube. Gernisavien could sense the fine adjustments to the hidden tanks of anti-gravity fluid.

Eventually the light faded except for the first twinkling of stars and the two minor moons hurtling above the cloud layer. Unseen sailors lit lantern running lights hanging from mast tops and spars. The climbing cloud towers lost the last of their glow and Dobby suggested that the three go below to prepare for the Spring Solstice party.

And what a party it was! The long Captain's Table was heaped with fine foods and rare wines. There was succulent roast bison from the Northern Steppes, swordfish from South Bay, and icy bellfruit from the far-off Equatorial Archipelago. The thirty guests—even the two dour Druids—ate and laughed as they never had before. The wine glasses continued to be refilled by the ship's stewards and soon the toasts began to flow as quickly as the wine. At one point Dobby rose to toast Captain Kokus and his splendid ship. Dobby referred to the grizzled old skysailor as a “fine fellow anthropoid” but stumbled a bit over the phrase and had to start again to general laughter. Captain Kokus returned the compliment by toasting the intrepid trio and praising Raul for his courageous victory at the Carnal Death Games. Nothing was said about the Galleon's undignified departure from the city mooring tower with two squads of lizard soldiers in hot pursuit of the last three passengers. The diners applauded and cheered.

Then it was time for the Solstice Ball to begin. The table was cleared, the tablecloth was furled, and then the table itself was broken into pieces and carried away. Guests stood around on the broad curve of the lowest deck and accepted refills once more. Then the ship's orchestra filed in and began their preparations.

When all was in readiness, Captain Kokus clapped his hands and there was a silence.

“Once again I formally welcome you all aboard the *Benevolent Zephyr*,” rumbled the Captain, “and extend to you all the best wishes of the Solstice season. And now ... let the dancing begin!”

And with a final clap of his hands the lantern light dimmed, the orchestra began playing, and great wooden louvers on the belly of the ship swung down so that nothing stood between the passengers and the depths

of sky beneath them except crystal floor. There was a general oohing and ahing and everyone took an involuntary step backward. Immediately this was followed by a burst of laughter and applause and then the dancing began.

On sped the great, graceful Sky Galleon into the aerial rivers of the night. Seen from above there would have been only the glow of the running lanterns and the only sound was the sigh and slap of wind in the sails and occasional calls of "All's Well!" from the lookout in the crow's nest. But seen from below, the ship blazed with light and echoed to tunes so ancient that they were said to have come from legendary Old Earth. Forest nymphs and demimen danced and pirouetted five thousand feet above the night-shrouded hills. At one point sober Gernisavien found herself in the undignified position of dancing with a centaur—lifted high in Raul's strong arms as his hooves tapped their own rhythm on the unscratchable crystal floor.

A storm came up before the party ended and the captain had the lights turned down so that the company could look past their feet at the lightning that rippled through the stormclouds far below. After a hushed moment, the orchestra began playing the Solstice Hymn and Gernisavien, much to her surprise, discovered herself singing the sentimental old ballad along with the others. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Then it was to bed, with revelers stumbling along the suddenly pitching corridors. Even the throes of an aerial storm could not prevent most of the tired passengers from dropping off to sleep. Dobby lay sprawled on his back, his purple beret on the pillow beside him, his great, smiling, simian mouth opened wide to release mighty snores. Gernisavien had found her bunk too large so she slept curled up in an open drawer which swung out slightly and then slid back to the ship's even rockings. Only Raul could not sleep, and after checking in on his friends he went above deck. There he stood huddled against the cold breeze and watched the first, false light of dawn touch the boiling cloudtops.

Raul was thinking grim thoughts. He knew that if they were not intercepted by the Wizard's flying machines, it was only a few more days' journey to South Bay. From there it would be a four or five day trek overland to the supposed Farcaster Site. They were already much too close to the Wizard's Stronghold. The odds were poor that the three friends would live out the week. Raul tapped at the dagger on his belt and watched the new day begin.

Mr. Kennan stood on the asphalt playground with fourth graders running and playing all around him and smiled up at the pleasant spring day. His army jacket, so frequently commented upon by the children, was not needed on such a warm day, but he wore it loosely along with his sports-

car cap. Occasionally he would grin just for the hell of it and rub at his beard. It was a *beautiful* day!

The children's spirits reflected the promise of summer all around them. The little playground that had been such a grim exercise yard through the long months of winter now seemed to be the most pleasant of places. Discarded jackets and sweaters littered the ground as children swung from the monkey bars, ran to the bordering alley and back, or played kickball near the brick cliff of the school building. Donald and Orville were engrossed in floating some tiny stick in a mud puddle, and even Terry entered into the spirit of the day by galloping around with Bill and Brad. Kennan overheard the boy say to Brad, "You be Dobby 'n I'll be Raul an' we'll be fightin' the ratspiders." Bill began to protest as the three boys ran toward the far end of the playground and Kennan knew that he was resisting becoming a female neo-cat, even for the ten minutes left of the recess.

Kennan breathed deeply and smiled once again. Life seemed to be flowing again after months of frozen solitude. Who would have dreamed that Missouri (hadn't it been part of the Confederacy?... or *wanted* to be ...) could have such chill, gray, endless winters? There had been five snow days when school had to be cancelled. After two such snow days followed by a weekend, Kennan had realized with a shock that he had not spoken to anyone for four days. Would they have come looking for him if he had died? Would they have found him in his furnished room, propped up at the jerry-rigged writing desk surrounded by his manuscripts and shelves of silent paperbacks?

Kennan smiled at the conceit now, but it had been a grim thought during the darkest days of winter. The kickball eluded a fielder and rolled to where Kennan was standing amid his inevitable flock of adoring girls. He made a production of scooping up the ball and throwing it to the shouting catcher. The throw went wide and bounced off the basement window of the art room.

Kennan turned away to survey the apple blossoms filling the tree in a nearby yard. New grass was growing up in the centerline of the alley. He could smell the river flowing by only four blocks away. Thirteen days of school left! He viewed the end of the year with self-conscious sadness mixed with unalloyed elation. He couldn't wait to be away—his car, newly resurrected, packed with his few cartons of books and possessions, and the summer sunlight warm on his arm as he headed east on Interstate 70. Kennan imagined his leisurely escape from the Midwest—the seemingly endless barrier of cornfields passed, the surge of traffic on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the contraction of distance between cities, the familiar exit signs in Massachusetts, the smell of the sea ... Still, this had been his first class. He would never forget these children and they would

never forget him. He imagined them sharing with their children and grandchildren the long, epic tale he had forged for them. During the past weeks he had even toyed with the idea of another year in Missouri.

Sara came forward from the little pack of girls following their teacher. She slipped her arm through Mr. Kennan's and looked up at him with a practiced coquettishness. Kennan smiled, patted her absently on the part in her hair, and took a few steps away from the children. Reaching into his coat pocket he withdrew a crumpled letter and reread parts of it for the tenth time. Then he replaced it and stared north toward the unseen river. Suddenly he was roused by an explosion of noise from the kickball players. Kennan glanced irritably at his watch, raised a plastic whistle to his lips, and signaled the end of recess. The children grabbed at scattered coats and ran to line up.

It was much warmer near South Bay. Raul, Dobby, and Gernisavien headed along the coast toward the legendary Farcaster Site. According to the ancient map which Dobby had found in the Man Ruins so many months ago, their journey's end should be only a few days to the west. Around her neck Gernisavien wore the key that they had found in the Carvnal Archives and paid for with the death of their old friend Fenn. If the Old Books were right, that key would activate the long dormant farcaster and reunite Garden with the Web of Worlds. Then would the tyranny of the cruel Wizards finally be cast down.

It was under the shadow of these same Wizards that our trio of friends made their way west. The sharp Fanghorn Mountains lay to the north and somewhere in their shadowy reaches was the feared Wizards' Stronghold.

The friends kept watch on the skies, always on the lookout for the Wizards' flying platforms as they moved along under the cover of lush, tropical foliage. Gernisavien marveled at the palm trees that rose two hundred feet high along their march.

On the afternoon of the third day they made camp near the mouth of a small river that fed into the South Sea. Dobby arranged their silk tent under the trees so that the warm breezes caused it to billow and ripple. Raul made sure the tent would be invisible from the air and then they sat down to their cold rations. By mutual consent they had avoided a fire since landing at South Bay, subsisting on biscuits and cold jerky purchased from the *Benevolent Zephyrs* ship stores.

The tropical sunset was spectacular. The stars seemed to explode into the night sky. Dobby pointed out the Southern Archer, a constellation that was invisible from their respective homes in the northern part of the continent. Gernisavien felt a stab of homesickness, but put off the sadness by fingering the ancient key around her neck and imagining the thrill of reopening the farcaster portals to a hundred worlds. Which of those stars

held other worlds, other peoples?

Dobby seemed to read her thoughts. "It seems impossible that the journey is almost over, doesn't it?"

Raul rose, stretched, and moved away in the darkness to reconnoiter the stream.

"I keep thinking of that Fuzzy's predictions," said Gernisavien. "Remember, in Tartuffel's Treehouse?"

Dobby nodded his massive head. How could one forget the frightening glimpses of the future which that strange little creature had offered each of them?

"Most of them have come to pass," grumbled the sorcerer-ape. "Even the Shrike is behind us."

"Yes, but not *my dream*—not the one with the Wizards all around in that terrible little room," replied Gernisavien. It was true. Of all the future-seeing dreams, the neo-cat's had been the most frightening, the most ominous, and the least discussed.

*Strapped down and helpless on a stainless steel operating table with the hooded Wizards looming over her. Then the tallest stepping forward into the blood-red light ... slowly drawing back its hood ...*

Gernisavien shuddered at the memory. As if to change the subject, Dobby stood and looked around in the darkness.

"Where's Raul?" His attention was captured by the rising of the two moons above the jungle canopy. Then he realized that the moons did not rise this early ...

"Run!" cried Dobby and pushed the startled neo-cat toward the trees. But it was too late.

The air filled with the scream of flying platforms. Rays of fire lanced out from the airborne machines and exploded the tops of trees into balls of flame. Knocked off her feet, fur and eyebrow whiskers singed from the heat, Gernisavien could see the hooded Wizards on the hovering machines, could hear the screams of the lizard soldiers as they leaped to the ground.

For a self-avowed coward, Dobby fought valiantly. Dodging the first thrust of a lizard's pike, he grabbed the long shaft and wrested it away. Dobby stabbed the startled reptile through the throat and turned to hold off five more of the hissing enemy. He had downed two lizards and was lifting a third high into the air with his long, strong arms when he was struck down by a blow from behind.

Gernisavien let out a yell and ran toward her friend, but before she had taken five steps a tall, scaly form loomed over her and something struck her on the skull. The next few minutes were confused. She regained consciousness just after she and Dobby were loaded aboard two platforms which lifted into the air.

Then came the stirring sound which had thrilled her so many times before—Raul's war horn blown loud and sweet and clear. Five pure notes of challenge broke through the babble of noise and the crackle of flames.

Raul came charging across the clearing in a full gallop, war spear leveled, shield high, with the cry of the Centaur Clan on his lips. Lizard soldiers went down like tenpins. A Wizard fired a shaft of flame, but Raul warded it off with his shield of sacred metal. His long spear broke as it pierced three lizards attempting to cower behind one another, but he cast it aside and pulled out his lethal short sword. Once again he shouted his clan war cry and waded into a pack of hissing, sword-wielding lizards.

Gernisavien felt the platform shudder and stop at tree-top height. She heard the hooded Wizard at the controls rasp a command and thirty lizards fired their crossbows. The air was filled with the scream of feathered bolts and then filled again with lizard screams as the deadly shafts slammed into them and centaur alike. Gernisavien felt her heart stop as she saw at least six bolts strike home against Raul's chest and sides. The great centaur went down in a heap of lizard bodies. Green tails and scaled arms still twitched in that pile of death.

Gernisavien let out one high, mournful cry of rage and then the cuff of a Wizard's fist against her head sent her back into blessed darkness.

Thurs., May 20

Warmer today. Temp. in the high 70's all day. Evening seems to go on forever.

Spent some time in the library tonight. Mailed off my vita to three more places—Phillips-Exeter, the Latin School, and Green Mtn. No response yet from Whitney on the Exp. Sch. Sent her the forms almost two weeks ago & she was going to talk to Dr. Fentworth as soon as she received them.

Picked up some chicken at Col. Sanders. The neighborhood has really come alive—with the window open I can hear kids screaming and playing down on the 5th St. School playground. (It's after 9 p.m. but there's still a little light in the sky.) Late at night I can hear the deep rumble of the ships' engines as the barges move upriver & then the slosh of the waves against the concrete pilings down at the end of Locust Street.

Talked to Mr. Eppet and Dr. North (Asst. Supt.) about next year. Could still get a contract here if I wanted it. (Not much chance of that.) Other teachers are circling my room like buzzards. Mrs. Kyle has her name on a piece of tape on my file cabinet and Mrs. Reardon (the greedy old cow—why doesn't she just tend to her husband's store and keep shouting at the kids not to read the comics?) has staked out my chair, the globe, (the one we just got in March), and the paperback stand. She can't wait for me to be gone next year. (They'll only have two fourth grades again—) When I

leave, the school can lapse back into the Dark Ages. (No wonder T.C. and the others called it the Menopause Foundation.)

Loud horn from the river. Ship's bells. Reminds me of the cowbells tinkling from the masts of the small craft at anchor in Yarmouth.

The story is right on schedule. Donna, Sara, and Alice were crying today. (So were some of the boys but they tried to hide it.) They'll be relieved to hear Monday's episode. It's not time for ol' Raul to die yet—when he does it will be in the finest epic tradition. If nothing else, this tale is a great lesson in friendship, loyalty, and honor. The ending will be sad—with Raul sacrificing himself to free the others—holding off the Wizards until his friends can activate the teleportation device. But hopefully the last episode where Gernisavien & Dobby bring the humans back to Garden to clobber the Wizards will offset the sad part. At least it'll be a hell of a finalé.

I've *got* to write this thing down! Maybe this summer.

Totally dark out now. The streetlight outside my second story window here is shining through the maple leaves. A breeze has come up. Think I'll go for a walk down to the river and then come back to do some work.

Gernisavien awoke to an icy wind whipping at her face. The nine Wizards' platforms were floating above mountaintops that glowed white in the starlight. The air was very thin. Gernisavien's arm hung over the side of the platform. If she rolled over she would fall hundreds of feet to her death.

The little neo-cat could dimly make out the other platforms silhouetted against the stars and could see the robed Wizard figures on each, but there was no sign of Dobby.

A hissing from a Wizard on her own platform, directed at the lizard at the controls, made Gernisavien look ahead. The platform was headed for a mountain that loomed up like a broken tooth directly ahead of them. The lizard made no attempt to change their course and Gernisavien realized that at their present speed they would crash into the rock and ice in less than thirty seconds. The neo-cat prepared to jump, but at the last second the lizard calmly touched a button on the panel and the platform began to slow.

Ahead of them the side of the mountain rose up into itself and revealed the entrance to a huge tunnel. Light as red as newly spilled blood poured out of the aperture. Then the platform was inside, the wall had lowered into place behind them, and Gernisavien was a prisoner in the Wizards' Stronghold.

On Saturday morning Mr. Kennan took Sara, Monica, and Terry on an all-

day outing. Terry was not pleased with the presence of the two giggling girls, but he occupied the front seat with an air of proprietorial indifference and ignored the silly outbursts of whispers emanating from the back. Mr. Kennan joked with all three children as he drove across the river into Daniel Boone National Forest. The girls dissolved into more giggles and frantic whispers whenever they were addressed, but Terry answered the jests with his usual humorless drawl.

Kennan parked near a picnic spot and the four spent an hour clambering around on a heap of boulders in among the trees. Then the teacher sent Terry back to the car and the boy returned with a wicker picnic hamper. Mr. Kennan had purchased sandwiches at the supermarket delicatessen and there were cans of soft drinks, bags of corn chips, and a pack of Oreo cookies. They sat on a high rock and ate in companionable silence. As always, Kennan marveled at the ravenous appetites of such little people.

In the early afternoon, he drove them back across the bridge and headed north along the state highway that soon headed back west again along the river. Fourteen miles and they were in Hermann, a picturesque little German community that had preserved all of the Victorian charm that nearby towns had either lost or never possessed. The *Maifest* was still underway and Kennan treated the kids to a ride on a wheezing Ferris wheel and to genuine chocolate ice cream at a sidewalk cafe. Women in bright peasant garb danced with older men who looked pleasantly ridiculous in *lederhosen*. A band sat in a white bandstand and gamely produced polka after polka for the small crowd.

It was almost dinnertime when Kennan drove them home. Monica whined and wheedled until the teacher told Terry to ride in the back and allowed Monica up front. This arrangement pleased no one. Terry and Sara sat in frozen silence while Monica fidgeted in paroxysms of nervousness whenever Kennan spoke to her or looked her way. Finally they stopped at a gas station under the pretext of a restroom break, and the old arrangement was restored for the last eight miles.

Both girls shouted their perfunctory "Thank-you-very-much-we-had-a-very-nice-time" while they ran pell mell for their respective front doors. Kennan heaved a melodramatic sigh after Monica was out of sight and turned to his last passenger.

"Well, Terry, where to? Shall we stop by the Dog'N'Suds for dinner?"

Surprisingly, the boy suggested an alternative. "How 'bout the fish fry?"

Kennan had forgotten about the fish fry. Held at the Elk's Lodge Recreation Area, three miles out of town, the annual event was evidently considered a big deal.

"OK," said Kennan, "let's go try the fish fry."

Half the town was there. Two huge tents sheltered tables where diners gorged themselves on fried catfish, French fries, and coleslaw. A few dilapidated carnival rides made up a midway in the high grass adjacent to the parking lot. Homemade booths sold pies, opportunities to throw a softball at weighted milk bottles, and raffle chances at a color television set. Out on the baseball diamond, the men's softball teams were playing their last tournament games. Deeper in the meadow, two opposing groups of volunteer firemen aimed their high pressure fire hoses at a barrel suspended on a cable. They pushed it back and forth to the cheering of a small crowd.

Kennan and Terry sat at a long table and ate catfish. They strolled past the booths while townspeople greeted Kennan by name. The teacher recognized about one person in ten. Together they watched a ballgame, and by the time it was over the sun had set and strings of hanging lights had come on. The merry-go-round cranked out its four tunes of imitation calliope music while fireflies blinked along the edge of the woods. Some boys ran by in a pack and called to Terry. Kennan pressed two dollars into the surprised boy's hands, and Terry ran off with the others toward the rides and games.

Kennan watched the beginning of the next game under the yellow field lights and then wandered back to the tent for a beer. Kay Bennett, the district's school psychologist, was there and Kennan bought a second round of beers while the two sat talking. Kay was from California, was in her second year here, and felt as trapped as Kennan in this small, Missouri backwater. They took their plastic cups and wandered away from the lights. Broad paths ran from the Elk Lodge to small cabins in among the trees. The two walked the trails and watched as the full moon rose above the meadow. Twice they came upon high school students petting in the darkness. Both times they turned away with knowing smiles and amused glances. Kennan felt his own excitement rising as he stood near the young woman in the moonlight.

Later, as he was driving home, Kennan slammed the steering wheel and wished that he had gotten to know Kay earlier in the year. How different the winter would have been!

Back in his apartment, Kennan got out the bottle of Chivas Regal and sat reading Voltaire at the kitchen table. A gentle night breeze came in through the screen. Two drinks later he showered and crawled into bed. He decided not to make a journal entry but smiled at the fullness of the day.

"Shit!" said Kennan as he sat up in bed. He dressed quickly, ignoring his socks and pulling on a nylon wind-breaker over his pajama tops.

The moon was bright enough that he could have driven without headlights as he pushed the Volvo around tight turns in the county road.

The parking lot was empty and there were deep ruts and gouges in the field. The rides were still there, but folded and ready to be loaded on trailers. The meadow was moon-dappled and, to Kennan's first relieved glance, empty. But then he saw the shadowy figure on the top row of empty bleachers.

When he came close enough the moonlight allowed him to see the streaks on the boy's dusty face. Kennan stood on a lower level and started to speak, found no words, stopped, and shrugged.

"I knowed you'd come back," said Terry. His voice seemed cheerful. "I knowed you'd come back."

Raul was alive. He struggled to free himself from the pile of lizard bodies. It had been the shirt. Since Carvnal he had worn the brightly decorated tunic that Fenn had given him at Treetops. *It is more than decoration.* Isn't that what the strange little Fuzzy had said? Indeed it was. The shirt had stopped six high-velocity crossbow bolts from penetrating. Certainly it had been more effective than the loose-link armor that still adorned the lizard corpses all around.

Raul made it up onto all four legs and took a few shaky steps. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious. It hurt to breathe. Raul felt his upper torso and wondered if the impact had broken a rib.

No matter. He moved around the clearing, first picking up his bow and then retrieving as many arrows as he could. He found his short sword where it had cleaved a lizard's shield, helmet, and skull. His clan warspear was broken, but he snapped off the sacred metal spearhead and dropped it in his quiver. When he had armed himself as well as he could, picking up a long lizard war lance, he galloped to the edge of the clearing.

Some of the palm trees were still smoldering. The Wizard platforms could not have been gone for long. And Raul knew where they must have gone.

To the north gleamed the high peaks of the Fanghorn Mountains. Wincing a bit, Raul strapped his shield and bow to his back. Then, breaking into an effortless, distance-devouring canter, he headed north.

• • •

Night. Bugs dance in agitated clouds around the mercury vapor lamps. Kennan is standing in a phone booth near a small grocery store. The store is closed and dark. The side street is empty.

"Yes, Whit, I *did* get it ..." Only Kennan's voice is audible in the darkness.

"No, I know what ... I am aware that it isn't easy to get to see Fentworth."

“Sure I do, but it isn’t that simple, Whit. Not only do I ... I have a *contract*. It specifies that ...”

“Those last days *will* make a difference ...”

“So what did he say?”

“Look, I don’t see what difference it makes if I see him now or when he gets back in August. If he has to decide on the position, they can’t fill it ‘til he gets back, can they? If I can just make arrangements to ...”

“Oh, yeah? Yeah, I see. *Before* he goes? Yeah. Yeah. Uh-huh, I see that ...”

“No, Whit, it *is* important that you’re going to be there. It’s just a matter of ... it’s just that I don’t have the money to fly. And then I’d have to fly back to get my stuff.”

“Yeah. Yeah. That’d work out, but I can’t afford to miss those last few ... I don’t know. I suppose, why? Hell, Whitney, you’ve been to Europe before ... why don’t you ... no, really, why don’t you tell your folks you can’t join them until late June or ...”

“Yeah. You did? Your folks won’t be there? What about ... whatshername, the housekeeper, yeah, Millie ... Until when?”

“Damn. Yes, it *does* sound good.”

“No, no, I *do* appreciate it, Whitney. You don’t know how much it means to me ...”

“Yeah. Uh-huh, that all makes sense but, look, it’s hard to explain. No, listen, there’s tomorrow. Friday, yeah ... and then Monday’s off because of Memorial Day. Then they go Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday’s their last day. No ... just report cards and stuff. Look, couldn’t it be just a week later?”

“Uh-huh. Yeah. OK, I understand that. Well, look, let me think about it overnight, all right?”

“I know that ... but he’s around on Saturday, isn’t he?”

“OK, look, I’ll call you tomorrow ... that’s Friday night ... and I’ll let you know what ... no, goddamn it, Whit, I’m poor but I’m not *that* poor, I don’t want your parents getting billed for ... look, I’ll call you about nine o’clock, that’s ... uh ... eleven your time, OK?”

“Well, you could call him on Saturday then and tell him I’d be there Wednesday, or I can just wait and hope something else opens up. Uh-huh, uh-huh ... well, let’s just ... just let me *think* about it, OK? Yes ... well, I *will* take that into consideration, don’t worry.”

“Look, Whit, I’m running out of quarters here. Yeah. About nine ... I mean eleven. No ... me too. It’s real good to hear your voice ... Yeah. OK. I’ll talk to you tomorrow then. Yeah ... I look forward to seeing you soon, too. Me too. Bye, Whit.”

After Dobby’s unsuccessful escape attempt, they hung him from chains on

the wall. From where Gernisavien was strapped to the table, she could not see if he was still breathing. The red light made it look as if he had been flayed alive.

Tall, shrouded shapes moved through the bloody dimness. When the Wizards weren't turned her way, Gernisavien strained against the metal bands at her wrists and ankles. No use. The steel did not budge an inch. The neo-cat relaxed and inspected the steel table to which she was pinned. The smooth surface had metal gutters on the side and small drain holes. Gernisavien wondered at their purpose and then wished she hadn't. Her heart was racing so fast that she feared it would tear its way out of her chest.

At least Dobby's escape attempt the day before had distracted the guards long enough for Gernisavien to raise her hands, lift the key, and swallow it.

There was a movement in the shadows and the tallest of the hooded figures stepped forward into a shaft of red light. Slowly the Wizard drew back its hood. Gernisavien stared in horror at overlapping scales, a face like a mantis's skull, great eyes that looked like pools of congealed blood, and fangs which dripped a thick mucus.

The Wizard said something that Gernisavien did not understand. Slowly it raised its bony, scaly hand. Clenched in the foul claws was a scalpel ...

Less than half a mile away, Raul labored uphill through heavy snowdrifts. His hooves slipped on icy rocks. Twice he caught himself and only the strength of his massive arms allowed him to pull his body to safety. A fall now meant certain death.

The shirt Fenn had given him provided some warmth for his upper body, but the rest of him was freezing. His hands were quickly growing numb, and Raul knew that they would not save him again should he slip. What was worse, the sun was beginning to set. The centaur knew that he would not survive another night at these elevations.

If only he could find the opening!

Just as he was beginning to despair, Raul heard a rock fall below him and then a whispered curse came on the icy wind. Crawling to the edge of the snowy overhang, he looked down on two lizard guards no more than thirty feet away. They stood next to a heavy metal door that had been painted white to blend in with the snowy mountainside. The lizards wore white hoods and parkas and if it had not been for the curse, Raul would never have seen them.

The sun was down. A freezing wind swept the slopes and threw icy crystals against the centaur's quivering flanks. Raul crouched in the snow. His frozen fingers reached for his bow and arrows.

From the estate atop the hill, the view of the river had been largely occluded by late-spring foliage. But from the wide veranda doors one could easily watch the boy and the man climbing the verdant curve of lawn. They walked slowly. The man was talking; the boy was looking up at him.

The man sat down on the grass and beckoned for the boy to do likewise. The boy shook his head and took two steps backward. The man spoke again. His hands were stretched out, fingers splayed wide. He leaned forward in an earnest gesture, but the boy took another two steps back. When the man rose, the boy turned and began walking quickly down the hill. The man took a few steps after him but stopped when the boy broke into a jog.

In less than a minute, the boy was out of sight around the bend in the railroad tracks and the man stood alone on the hill.

Kennan drove the Volvo down the narrow side street and stopped opposite Terry's house. He sat in the car for a long minute with his hands on the steering wheel. As Kennan reached for the Volvo's door handle, Mr. Bester came out of the house and stepped down from the high porch into the side yard. The man wore baggy bib overalls and no shirt. As he bent to peer under the house for something, his gray stubble caught the light. Kennan paused for a second and then drove on.

At two a.m. Kennan was still loading the books into cardboard cartons. As he passed in front of the screened window he thought he heard a noise from across the street. He put down the stack of books, walked to the screen, and looked down through streetlight glare and leaf shadows.

“Terry?”

There was no response. The shadows on the lawn did not move and a few minutes later Kennan resumed his packing.

He had planned to leave very early Sunday morning, but it was almost ten before the car was loaded. It was strangely cold, and a few drops of rain fell from leaden skies. His landlord was not home—in church probably—so Kennan dropped the key in his mailbox.

He drove around the town twice and past the school four times before he cursed softly and headed west on the main highway.

Traffic was very light on Interstate 55 and the few cars there tended to drive with their lights on. Occasionally rain would spatter the windshield. He stopped for breakfast on the west side of St. Louis. The waitress said that it was too late for breakfast so he had a hamburger and coffee. The

storm light outside made the café seem dark and cold.

It was pouring by the time he passed through downtown St. Louis. The tricky lane changes made Kennan miss seeing the Gateway Arch as he crossed the Mississippi. The river was as gray and turbulent as the sky.

Once in Illinois, the Volvo headed east on Interstate 70, the trip settled down to the hiss of tires on wet pavement and the quick metronome of the wipers. This soon depressed Kennan and he switched on the radio. It surprised him a bit to hear the roars and shouts of the Indianapolis 500 being broadcast. He listened to it as great trucks whooshed past him in the drizzle. Within half an hour the announcer in Indianapolis was describing the storm clouds coming in from the west, and Kennan turned off the radio in the sure knowledge that the race would be called.

In silence he drove eastward.

On the Tuesday after Memorial Day, Mr. Kennan's fourth graders filed into their classroom to find Mrs. Borcherding installed behind the teacher's desk. All of them knew her from times she had substituted for their regular teachers in years past. Some of the children had known her as their first grade teacher during her last year before retirement.

Mrs. Borcherding was a swollen mass of fat, wrinkles, and wattles. Her upper arms hung loose and flapped when she gestured. Her legs were bloated masses of flesh straining against support stockings. Her arms, hands, and face were liberally sprinkled with liver spots and her whole body gave off a faint aroma of decay that soon permeated the room. The children sat with their hands folded on their desks in unaccustomed formality and faced her silently.

"Mr. Kennan has been called away," said the apparition in a voice that seemed too phlegmy to be human. "I believe there was an illness in the family. At any rate, I will be your teacher for these last three days of school. I want it understood that I expect everyone in this class to *work*. It does not matter to me whether there are three days of school left or three hundred. Nor am I interested in whether you've had to work as hard as you should have up to now. You will do your *best work* right up until the time you are dismissed on Thursday afternoon. Your report cards have already been filled out, but don't think that you can start fooling around now. Mr. Eppert has given me the authority to change grades as I see fit. And that includes conduct grades. It is still possible that some of you may have to be retained in fourth grade if I see the necessity during the next few days. Now, are there any questions? No questions? Very good, you may get out your arithmetic books for a drill."

During morning recess, Terry was besieged with kids demanding

information. He stood as mute as a rock against the crashing waves of curiosity and desperation. The one piece of information he did impart caused the children to turn and babble at one another like extras in a melodramatic crowd scene.

It was mid-afternoon before someone worked up nerve to confront Mrs. Borcherding. Naturally it was Sara who went forward. In the thick stillness of the handwriting exercise, Sara's tiny voice was as high and urgent as a bee's distracting buzz. Mrs. Borcherding listened, frowned, and focused her scowl on the front row as Sara went back to her seat.

"Terry Bester."

"Yes'm," said Terry.

"Mmmmm ... Sally says that you ... ah ... have something to share with us," began Mrs. Borcherding. The class started to giggle at the mistake with Sara's name but then froze as Mrs. Borcherding's little eyes darted around to find the source of the noise. "All right, since the class evidently has been expecting this for some time, we will get this ... story ... out of the way right now and then go on to social studies."

"No, ma'm," said Terry softly.

"What was that?" Mrs. Borcherding looked long and hard at the boy, obviously ready to rise out of her chair at any sign of defiance. Terry sat at polite attention, his hands folded on his notebook. Only in the firm set of the thin lips was there any sign of impertinence.

"It would be convenient to get this out of the way now," repeated the substitute.

"No, ma'am," repeated Terry and continued quickly before the shocked fat lady could say anything. "I was told that I was s'posed to tell it on the last day. That's Thursday. That's what he said."

Mrs. Borcherding stared down at Terry. She started to speak, closed her mouth with an audible snap, and then began again. "We'll use your regular Thursday recess time. Right before clean up. Those people who wish to *miss recess* can stay inside to listen. The others will be allowed to go outside and play."

"Yes, ma'am," said Terry and returned to his handwriting drill.

Wednesday morning was hot and thick with summer. The children entered the classroom with hopeful eyes that turned to downcast glances as they spied the bulk of Mrs. Borcherding behind the desk. She rarely rose from her chair, and, as if to balance her immobility, the children were confined to their desks, Mr. Kennan's assignment check-out cards and independent work centers abandoned.

At each recess Terry was mobbed with children seeking some small preview. Uncharacteristically for him, the attention did not seem to please him. He sought the far reaches of the playground and stood throwing

pebbles at a picket fence.

Before school on Thursday, the rumor spread that Mr. Kennan's Volvo had been seen on Main Street the night before. Monica Davis had been eating downtown at the Embers Restaurant when she was sure she had seen Mr. Kennan drive by. Sara took it upon herself to call her classmates with the information and happily accepted the reprimands from irate parents who did not appreciate early morning phone calls from fourth graders. By eight-fifteen, forty-five minutes before the bell rang, most of the class was on the playground. It was Bill who volunteered to go into the school and check out the situation.

Three minutes later he returned. One look at his crestfallen face told most of them what they needed to know.

"Well?" insisted Brad.

"It's Borcherding," said Bill.

"Maybe he's not here yet," ventured Monica, but few believed it and the girls wilted under their reprimanding stares.

When it came time to file in, reality sat before them in the same strained, purple-print dress that she had worn on Tuesday. The day dragged by with that indescribable, open-windowed languor that only the last day of school can engender. The morning was filled with busy work made all the more maddening by the echoing emptiness of the rest of the school. Most classes were gone on class picnics. Mr. Kennan had long ago outlined his plan of hiking all the way to Riverfront Park to spend the entire day in "an orgy of playing softball and eating goodies." Specific children had volunteered to bring specific goodies. But there was no question of that now. When the students glanced up from their work to acknowledge a command from Mrs. Borcherding, there was a common look in their eyes. They shared a dawning realization that the world was not stable; that there were trapdoors to reality which could be sprung without warning. It was a lesson that all of the children instinctively had known once, but had been foolish enough to forget temporarily while encircled with the protective ring of magic.

The day crawled to noon. The class ate in the almost empty lunchroom, sharing it with only a first grade class being punished and five slobbering members of Miss Carter's self-contained EMR class.

Shouts on the playground were strangely subdued. No one approached Terry. If he was nervous, he did not show it as he stood leaning against a tetherball pole with his arms folded.

In the afternoon they checked in their rented books—Brad and Donald had to pay for their lost or damaged books—and sat in silent rows as Mrs. Borcherding laboriously took inventory. They knew that the last hour and a half of school would consist of scrubbing desks, clearing the walls of posters, and covering the bookshelves with paper. All these activities were

useless, the children knew, because in a week or two the custodians would move everything out of the room to clean again anyway. They knew that Mrs. Borcherding would wait until the last possible moment to hand out their report cards, hinting all the while that some of them did not pass—or certainly did not *deserve* to. They also knew that everyone would pass.

At five minutes past two, Mrs. Borcherding ponderously stood and looked at the twenty-seven children sitting silently in their strangely clean desks. Tall stacks of books surrounded them like defensive sandbags.

"All right," said Mrs. Borcherding, "you may go out to recess."

No one moved except Brad who stood up, looked around in confusion at his seated classmates, and then sat back down with a foolish grin. Mrs. Borcherding flushed, started to speak, checked herself, and dropped heavily into her chair.

"Terry, I believe that you had something to say," she wheezed. She glanced up at the clock on the wall—it was not running—and then down at the alarm clock which the children had covertly continued to wind. "You have thirteen minutes, young man. Try not to waste their entire recess time."

"Yes'm," said Terry and stood. He crossed to the long bulletin board and raised his hand to the triangular pattern of magic marker mountains which ran near the southern coast of the sketched-in continent. He said nothing. The children nodded silently. Terry dropped his hand and went to the front of the room. His corduroy pants made a *whik-wik* sound as he walked.

Once at the front of the room, he turned and faced his classmates. Sluggish currents of heat, the drone of insects, and distant shouts came through the open windows. Terry cleared his throat. His lips were white but his high, soft voice was firm as he began to speak.

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Raul was up the hill from the two lizards who're guarding the door to that place where the Wizards was keeping Dobby and Gernisavien. Remember, this was about the time that that big Wizard was getting his knife out to maybe cut Gernisavien open to get the key. Anyway, Raul's fingers was froze, but he knew he'd have to kill the lizards real quick or he wouldn't get a second chance. The snow was blowing all around him and it was getting dark real fast.

The lizards were hunkered over and sort of mumbling to each other. They were wearing these real thick parka-like coats and Raul knew that if he didn't shoot just right that the arrow wouldn't get through all that stuff. Especially if they was wearing armor too.

So Raul got two arrows out. One he stuck point first in the snow and

the other he goes and notches. His hands feel like he's wearing thick gloves but he ain't. He's worried that he can't feel nothing with his fingers and maybe the arrow'll let go too soon and that'll tip off the lizards. But he tries not to think about that and he draws the bowstring back as far as he can. Remember, this is a special bow—it come down the clan line from his old man who was war chief of all the centaurs and nobody 'cept for Raul can pull it all the way back.

He does. And he has to hold it that way while he takes aim. His muscles are freezing and for a second he begins to shake up and down, but he takes a big, deep breath and holds it steady ... the bow ... on that first lizard, the one who's standing closest to the door. It's real dark now but there's a little bit of red light coming from around that door.

*Swiish!* Raul lets her go. And no sooner than he lets the first one fly but than he's notchin' the second arrow and pulling back on it. The first lizard—the one nearest the door?—he makes a funny little sound as the arrow gets him smack dab in the throat and sticks out the other side. But the other lizard, he's looking out the other way and when he turns to see what's going on—*swiish*—there's an arrow growin' out of the back of *his* neck too and then he falls, but he slides over the edge and keeps on going down to the frozen ice about two miles below, but neither one of them made no sound.

And then Raul's coming down the hill on all four legs, sort of slipping and sliding and making straight for the door. Well, it's a real big metal door and there ain't no doorknob or nothing and it's locked. But the first lizard—the one who's laying dead in the snow—he's got this ring of keys with about sixteen big keys on it. And one of them fits. But it's lucky that he wasn't the one who fell over the edge, is all.

So Raul sticks this key in and the door slides back sideways and there's this long tunnel going off straight ahead 'til it turns and it's all lit with red light and sort of spooky. He walks into the tunnel and maybe he done something wrong or maybe there's an electric eyeball or something 'cause suddenly these bells are going off like an alarm.

"Well, I done it now," Raul thinks to hisself and takes off galloping down the hallway full speed. He'd put his bow back by this time and he's got his sword out.

Meanwhile, you remember that Gernisavien was all strapped down to this steel table and there was a Wizard standing over her fixing to slit open her belly to get at that farcaster key? He had the knife out—it was sort of like a doctor's knife, it was so sharp you could cut butter with it—and he was standing there just sort of deciding where to make the cut when all the bells went off.

"It's Raul!" yells Dobby who's hanging there on the wall and who's still alive.

The Wizard, he turns real fast and throws some switches and all these TV screens light up. On some of the screens you see lizard soldiers running and others you see a couple of Wizards sort of looking around and on one you see Raul running down this hallway.

The Wizard says something in Wizard talk to these other guys in robes in the room and then they go running out of the room together. So now Dobby and Gernisavien are all alone in there, but there ain't nothing they can do except to watch the TV because they're all tied up.

Raul, he's coming around this bend and all of the sudden here are a bunch of lizards in front of him and they've got crossbows and he's just got his sword. But they're more surprised than he is and he puts his head down and charges full speed into them and before they can get their crossbows loaded and everything he's in there swinging and there are lizard heads and tails and stuff flying around.

Now Gernisavien can see this on the TV and she and Dobby are cheering and everything but they can see the other TVs too, and the halls is full of lizards and the Wizards are coming too. So Dobby, he begins to pull and pull against the chains as hard as he can. Remember, his arms are stronger than they look like we found out when he held up part of Tartuffel's Treehouse that time.

"What're you doing?" goes Gernisavien.

"Tryin' to get at that!" goes Dobby and he points at the table full of test tubes and bottles and all the chemical stuff where the Wizards had been working.

"What for?" goes Gernisavien.

"It's nucular fuel," Dobby says, "and that blue stuff is anti-gravity stuff like in the sky galleon. If it gets all mixed up ..." And Dobby keeps pulling and pulling until the veins stood up out of his head, but finally one of the chain things breaks and Dobby's hanging down by one arm but he's too tired to keep going.

"Wait a minute," goes Gernisavien. She's watching the TV.

Raul was killing lizards this way and that and he got to within maybe a hundred feet or so to where Dobby and Gernisavien's being kept, but he don't know that and suddenly here come these four or five Wizards with their fire guns. Raul, he barely gets his shield up in time. As it is they scorched off some of his hair and mane and burned up all of his arrows and stuff on his back. And they burned up his daddy's bow, too.

So Raul starts going backwards and he knows they're trying to cut him off 'cause he can see the lizards running down these side hallways. So he turns and gallops as fast as he can but the Wizards are coming down the main way and when they get a clear shot he'll be a goner. So Raul stops and picks up a crossbow and he sort of keeps them back by shooting their way.

All of the sudden he's in this big room where the Wizards keep their flying platforms. And Raul goes and jumps the railing and lands on one and starts to look at the controls. He pushes this button and the wall rolls up—it's the door on the side of the mountain. Raul looks outside and sees the fresh air and stars and everything. And when he looks back all he can see is doorways full of lizards and here come the Wizards with their fire guns and everything and Raul knows that if he stays he can't dodge them all. Raul's not so much afraid of getting killed as he is of getting hurt real bad and having to stay there all chained up like Gernisavien and Dobby.

So Raul, he pushes the buttons until the flying platform starts flying and the Wizards are blasting away with their fire guns, but he's already outside in the night air and they can't get a good shot at him as he flies away sort of zig-zagging.

Now back up the hallway, Gernisavien and Dobby've been watching all this on the TV. Dobby's face, it always looks kind of sad but now it looks sadder than ever.

"Can you get your other arm loose?" goes Gernisavien.

Dobby just shakes his head no. He ain't got no leverage.

Gernisavien, she knows that the key's still in her stomach. And she knows that the Wizards're planning to use it to get at all those other worlds in the Web of Worlds. And maybe the humans could fight them off but it looks like it'd be real hard what with the Wizards coming on them by surprise and all. Gernisavien remembers all the times they talked about when they would get to the farcaster and all the planets they'd go to together and all the people they'd see.

"It's been fun, hasn't it?" goes Dobby.

"Yeah," says Gernisavien. And then she says. "Go ahead. Do it."

Dobby knows what she means. He smiles and the smile, it's sort of sad and sort of happy at the same time. Then he leans out real far until he's standing on the wall sideways. That's when they hear the Wizard's footsteps in the hallway. So Dobby starts swinging his right arm—the one with the chain hanging loose from it—and then he brings it down on the nucular fuel and other things on the table and smashes them all together.

Raul is five or six miles away when he sees the mountain blow up. The top just sort of came off and the whole thing went up in the air like a volcano. Raul's just high enough and just far enough away that he didn't get blown all to pieces with it. And he knew who did it. And why.

Now I don't know what else he was thinking about. But he was all by himself now. And he flew around up there alone while all the lava runs down the mountains and sparks shoot up into the air. And there's nowhere for him to go now. He can't get the farcaster to work all by himself. Gernisavien had the key and Dobby was the only one who knew how to turn it on.

Raul stayed up there in the dark for a long time. Then he turned the platform around and flew away. And that's the end.

There was a silence. Children sat stone still and watched as Terry went back to his desk. His corduroys went *whik-wik*. As he sat down, several of the girls began to sob. Many of the boys looked down or raised their desk lids to hide their own tears.

Mrs. Borcherding was at a loss. Then she turned to the wall clock, turned back angrily to the alarm clock, and raised it between her and the class.

"See what you did, young man," she snapped. "You've wasted the class's entire recess and put us behind schedule on our clean-up. Quickly everyone, get ready to scrub your desks!"

The children rubbed at their eyes, took deep breaths, and obediently set to the final tasks that stood between them and freedom.